

Seeing Studies: Practicing Praxis in Graphic Design

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"Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering it, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work of the alien one."

—Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, 1923*

* Reprinted in the closing page of *Seeing Studies*.

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Introduction

In September 2010, after completing one year of my Master's studies at Aalto University, I left school for an internship at Bildwechsel/Image-Shift studio in Berlin. During the three months I spent at the studio, our main focus was the book *Seeing Studies*, which will serve as the starting point and main subject matter of this thesis. *Seeing Studies* aims to present the scope of a long-term research project developed by Natascha Sadr Haghighian and Ashkan Sepahvand for the *Institute For Incongruous Translation*, and is an investigation of the ways in which we learn to see.

In essence, the work on *Seeing Studies* was one of translation—the transformation from one language and culture to another, from the literal to the visual, and from the conceptual to the physical object. Both the content of the book and its design represent an attempt to create a collaborative discussion, visiting different “schools of seeing”. The book brings together different perspectives concerning the meanings of seeing and translates these perspectives into the design. It proposes seeing as a process of translation within which meanings are forever changing and transforming. These dynamics were also inherent in the design process — in the ways in which ideas were discussed and decisions were made. In this manner, the process of forming and producing the book was very much similar to the description of its content: the way in which ideas were negotiated allowed for conversation and collaboration, but also aroused dispute and frustration.

Seeing Studies started from a schoolbook published by the Iranian Ministry of Education, which is used to teach art in the first year of Iranian public middle school. As Natascha and Ashkan embarked on translating this schoolbook from Farsi to English, they were required to engage with multiple viewpoints and discordant voices. The process of translation from one language and culture to another emphasized that understanding can only be partial. Collaborators practicing in cultural and educational fields were invited as interlocutors to extend the translation

process into a debate on the conditions of seeing, examining ways in which we learn to see and conventions by which we perceive, and the pathways in which meanings find themselves transmitted, received and reapplied.

Seeing Studies is an investigation of seeing as a problem: as a fundamental sense whose commonality is biologically assumed, but whose difference is culturally inevitable. Immediately applying to art, visuality and depiction, "seeing" is approached as a problem that affects social reality. Seeing as a problem allows us to question modes of communication, methods for instruction, the ways in which world views are shaped, and the processes by which we learn (and unlearn). All these are affected by what we consider to be "visible," and by what remains "invisible."

By reflecting and commenting on the *Seeing Studies* work process, and looking into the larger questions that were at the heart of this project, I hope to inquire the reflective cycle between the "making of" and the "thinking about" in graphic design practice.

This thesis will be presented on multiple levels: concrete facts, practical applications and spaces of negotiation, and how these translate into a design methodology and approach. Looking into these orientation points, I will elicit more theoretical considerations, relying on my position as both a practitioner, and, now, observer.

Through the medium of written text, I would like to materialize a practice. I am approaching this task as a practitioner, not theorizing or studying it from the outside, but rather materializing something I was involved in through practice. The terms for this thesis were set up by the actions of the practice, as *Seeing Studies* focuses both literally and metaphorically on different modes of translation. Translation is being understood as a space for negotiation, debate, discord and echoes. This necessitates the textual materialization of the practice presented as a set of negotiations. In this sense, the thesis is a continuation of my involvement in *Seeing Studies*, and is a translation of the project into the form of an essay. In my writing I will address problems in practice, design and production, expanding the discourse onto other theoretical considerations, and demonstrating concrete practical implementations.

What we write is always, unavoidably, from a perspective. This thesis is based on my own perspective, tracing some of my own experiences and the modes of thought that expand from them. I hope to use my writing as an opportunity to clarify things to myself and others regarding the process and practice that took place in this specific project, but also regarding graphic design in general, claiming my own place and position within this practice. Although I joined *Seeing Studies* as an outsider, I feel strongly involved in the social and political context of the project. Because there are many political and geographical barriers and blockages between my own position and the project's starting point, the Iranian schoolbook, the project presented an opportunity for interaction that enabled me to discover a world that was otherwise inaccessible to me.

Because the project took place more than a year ago, some of the issues at hand may have lost their sense of urgency. What is left now are the traces of actions: memories of a process and the final outcome, the publication. In the following pages I will attempt to trace these actions, discussing *Seeing Studies* as a process and as an object, using it as a starting point and an anchor for an expansive discourse regarding graphic design as a practice and an action, which will be presented in the second part of this thesis — "Practicing Praxis". I will begin my inquiry into *Seeing Studies* by presenting a review of the methodology and work process used while working on the book, analyzing concrete decisions and choices that were made during the design process, and expanding on the larger questions that rose from the work methodology presented.

This inquiry will be followed by a conversation with designers Pierre Maite and Sandy Kaltenborn from Bildwechsel / Image-Shift studio, who will discuss the project in retrospect from the designer's point of view. Unfortunately I could not interview Farhad Fozouni, one of the project's graphic designers and collaborators, as I would have liked to. Conducting this conversation proved to be too complicated because of technical and political obstacles, as Farhad works and lives in Iran, and, at the time of writing these words, I am living and working in Tel Aviv, Israel.

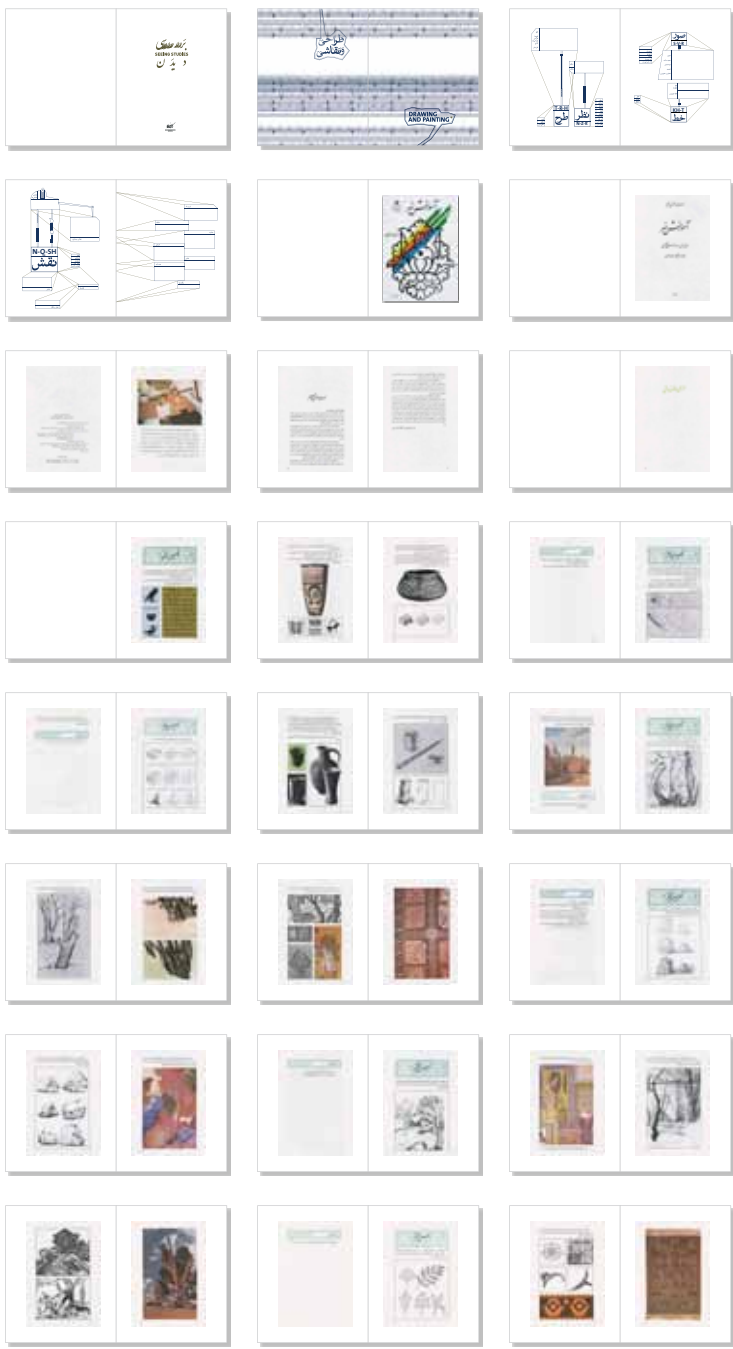
Seeing Studies

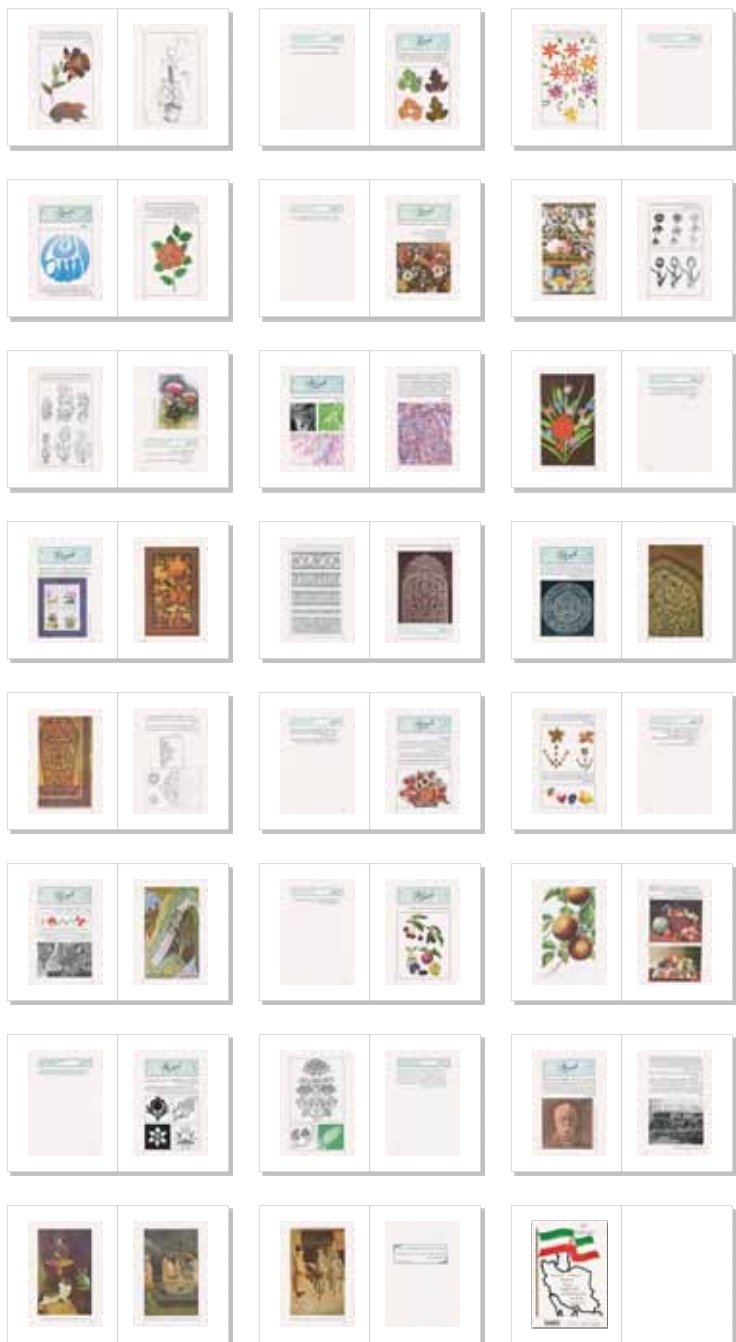
The book *Seeing Studies* consists of three main parts:

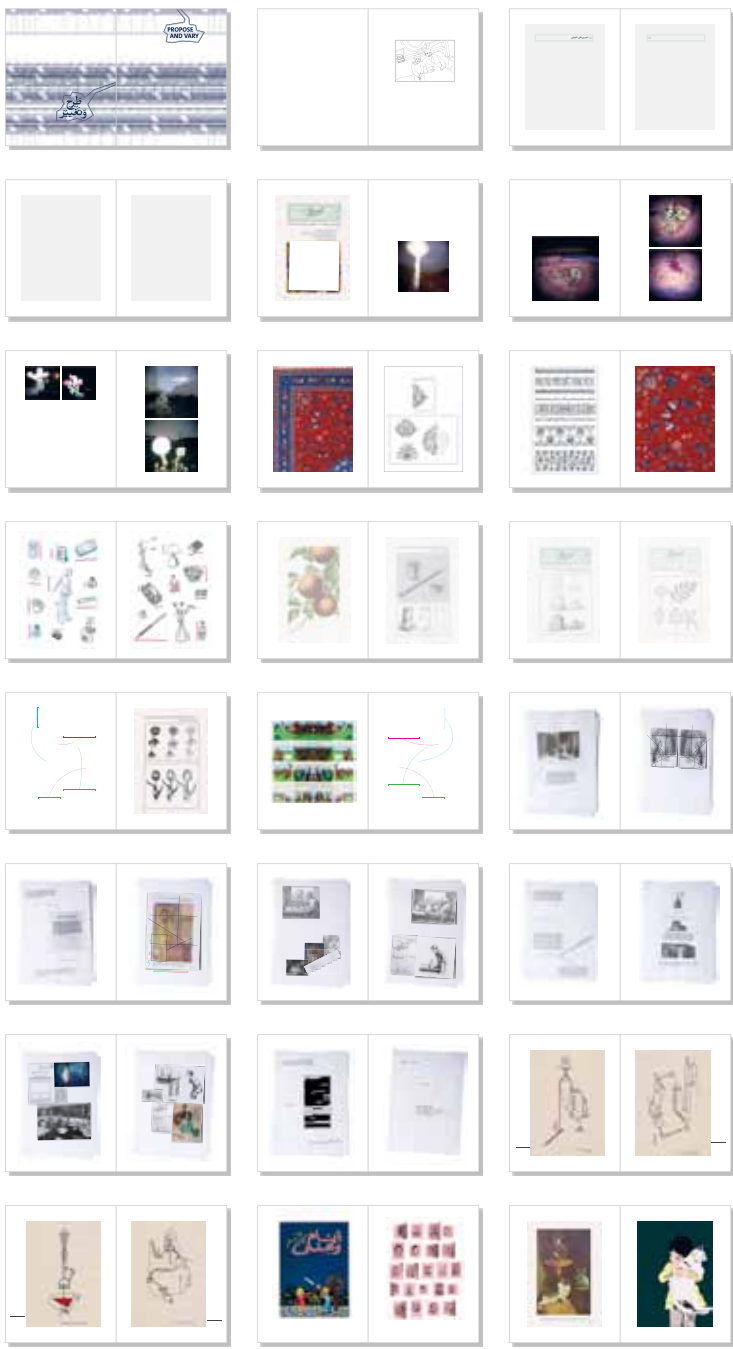
The first part, titled *Drawing and painting*, presents a reproduction of the first part of the Iranian schoolbook "Tarrâhi and Naqâshi", with English translations at its margins. To set the tone and serve as an index and reference point to the schoolbook, a 'translation landscape' and a note on the translation are presented as an introduction.

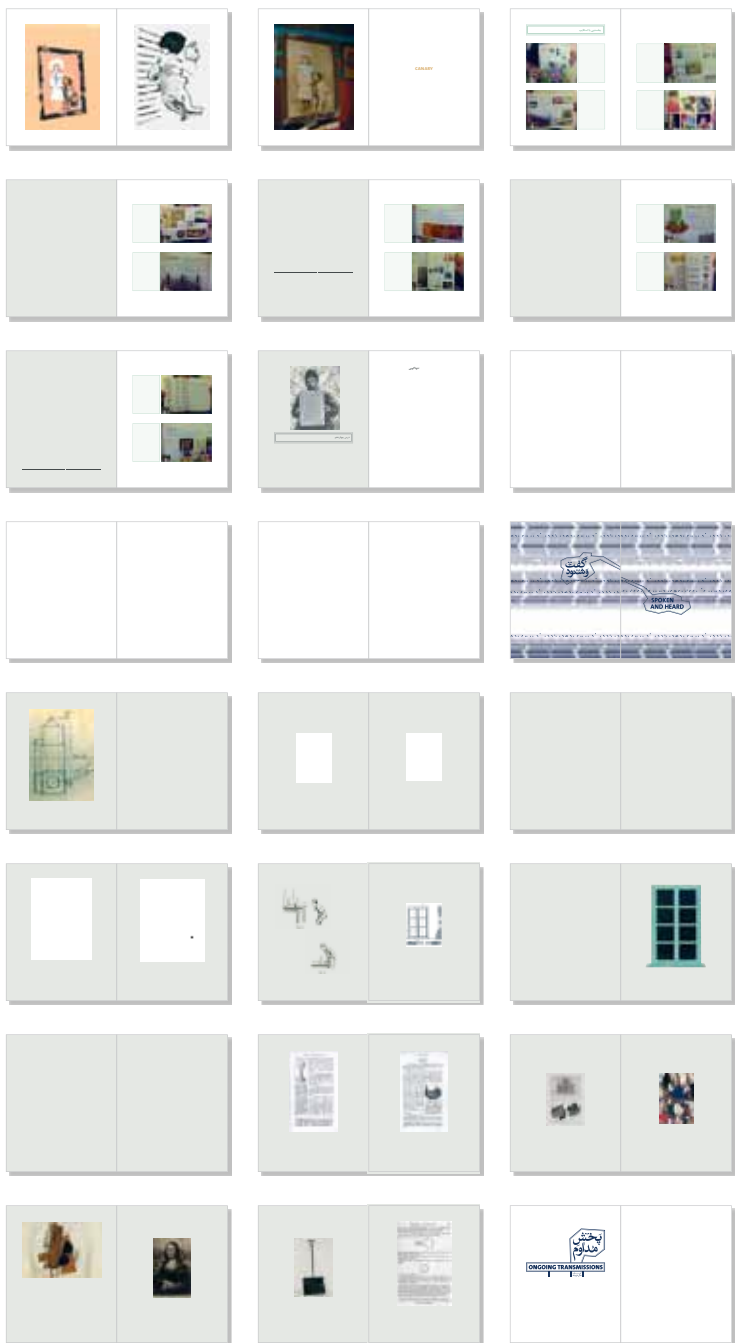
The second part, titled *Propose and Vary*, consists of proposals and variations on the schoolbook from 18 different contributors. These take shape in various forms such as words, pictures, objects and concepts.

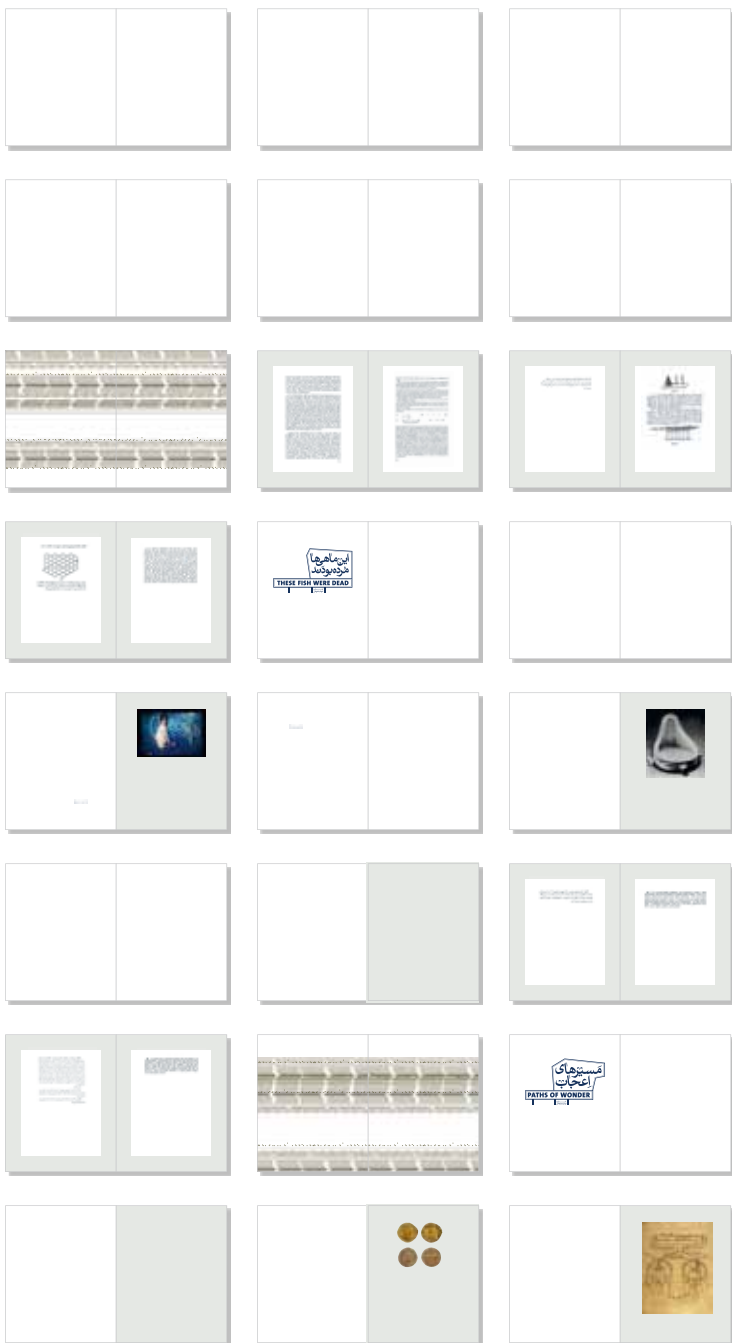
The third part, titled *Spoken and Heard*, is composed of four conversations with four interlocutors from different fields: a conversation with Molly Nesbit, Professor of Art at Vassar College, with introductory commentary by Ashkan Sepahvand; a conversation with artist Shahab Fotouhi; a conversation with Oya Pancarođlu, Assistant Professor in the Department of Archaeology and History of Art at Bilkent University; and a conversation with director and producer Reza Haeri.

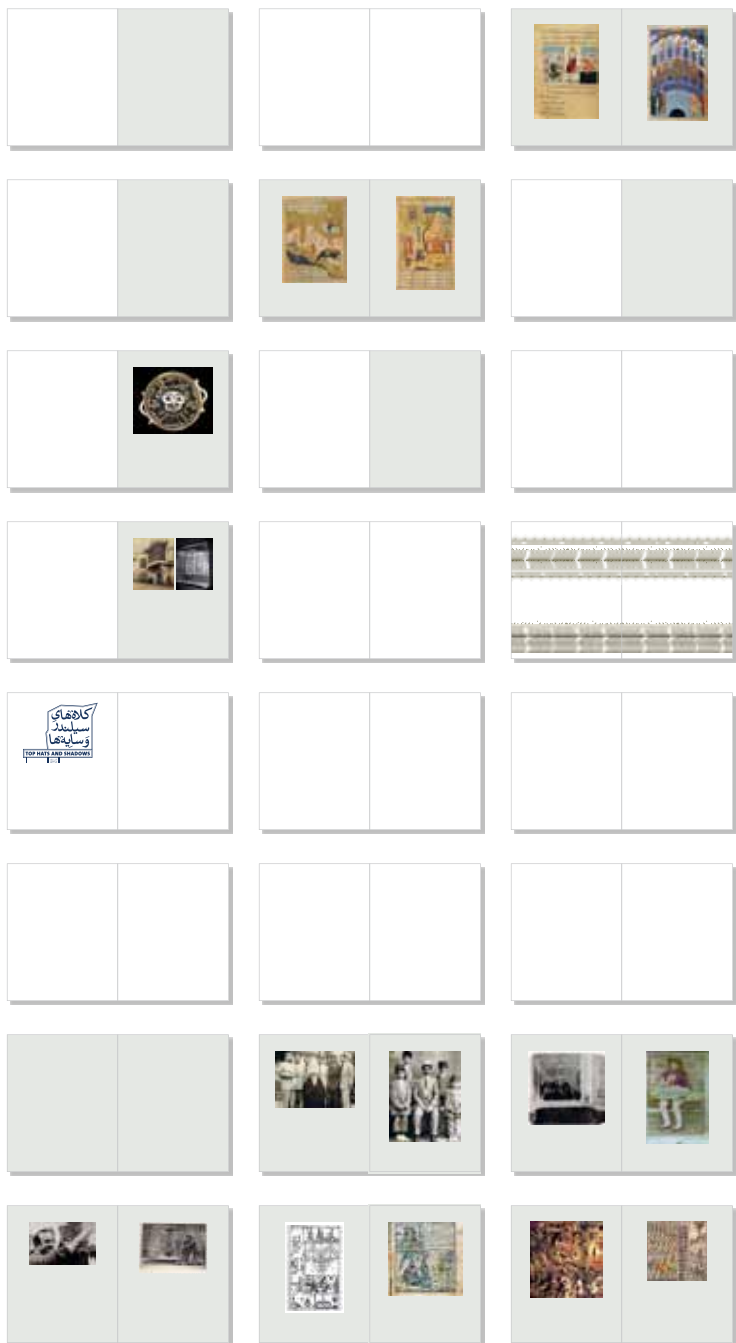


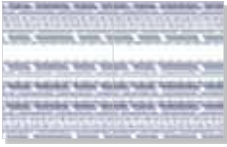












Production Details

Editors: Natascha Sadr Haghighian and Ashkan Sepahvand for the Institute For Incongruous Translation.

Designers: Image-Shift, Berlin and Farhad Fozouni for Studio Tehran.

Authors: Reza Abedini, Nazgol Ansarinia, Homayoun Askari Sirizi, Mehraneh Atashi, Mahmoud Bakhshi, Daniel Berndt, Binna Choi, Shahab Fotouhi, Farhad Fozouni, Reza Haeri, Hatem Imam, Molly Nesbit, Oya Pancarođlu, Tina Rahimi, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Ashkan Sepahvand, Setareh Shahbazi, Zeinab Shahidi, Jana Traboulsi.

Translations: Katayoun Arian, Bavand Behpour, Farzaneh Doosti, Media Farzin, Zoya Honarmand, Ali Masoudinia, Sohrab Mohebbi, Hossein Nazari, Tina Rahimi, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Ashkan Sepahvand.

Producers: document a (13), Casco - Office for Art, Design and Theory.

Publisher: Hatje Cantz, February 16, 2011

Language: English / Farsi

Format: 21 x 26 cm

Weight: 0.9 kg

Pages: 304 pp.

Paper: Munken Lynx, 100 g/m2

Binding: loose-leaf, fastened with binder clips

Typeface: English: Thesis / Farsi: Nazanin

Price: € 39.80, out of print

ISBN (PRINT):
978-3-7757-2972-7

Seeing Studies Timeline



Teheran



Berlin

August 2009

Natascha Sadr Haghighian and Ashkan Sepahvand come across the Iranian schoolbook in a bookstore, and decide to collaborate as the Institute For Incongruous Translation.

March 2010

Natascha meets with Pierre Maite and Sandy Kaltenborn (Bildwechsel/Image-Shift), introduces them to Ashkan and asks them to join the project.

August, 2010

Natascha, Ashkan, Sandy and Pierre are introduced to Farhad Fozouni, and conduct workshops with Shahab Fotouhi and Reza Haeri.

September 27th 2010

I begin my internship at Bildwechsel/Image-Shift studio.

October 2010

The design process on the book Seeing Studies begins with Natascha, Ashkan, Pierre, Sandy, and me working from Berlin, and Farhad working from Teheran.

A shared Dropbox folder is set up, and a "ping-pong" of sketches begins between the designers.

First round of materials: English translation of the Iranian schoolbook, conversations with Molly Nesbit and Oya Pancarodlu, first artist contributions. The book size and paper is set.

October 29th-31st

Weekend workshop on the book layout and structure.

November 2010

Second round of materials: Conversations with Shahab Fotouhi and Reza Abedini, commentary to the conversation with Molly Nesbit, and more artist contributions.

The book layout, grid and Latin typography is set. Work begins on setting the Farsi type. Different treatments for the different conversations are proposed.

First proposals for the book cover and patterned pages are discussed.

The translation landscape is set. The foredge printing is set.

Instructions received from printer.

December 2010

Third round of materials: Final images, revised texts and colophon.

Images are treated, and final design decisions are made regarding the patterned pages, titles, and cover.

The book is proofread in both Farsi and English.

December 15th - Cover files sent to printer.

December 22nd - All files sent to printer.



Freising



Utrecht

December 23rd-24th 2010

Farhad arrives to Germany and meets with Sandy and Natascha to supervise the book printing.

January 19th-22nd 2011

Book launch and workshop at Casco. All collaborators and contributors are invited to meet each other and participate.

A Book on a Book: The Self Reflexive Object

As mentioned in the introduction, the project of *Seeing Studies* emerged from an Iranian schoolbook. So does the publication itself, in which the first chapter, *Drawing and Painting*, consists of a reproduction of the book with an English translation on its margins. The schoolbook is laid out in a 1:1 scale representation of the original, maintaining some of its autonomous status as a "ready made", a book within a book. Although the schoolbook loses its physical presence as an object, its content is presented as close as possible to the original text. This affirms the existence of the original schoolbook as an object, and simultaneously emphasizes that what you see is a mere representation. By leaving the schoolbook in its original form and layout and limiting the intervention to the margins, the book points to its own materiality by way of self-reflexion, referring to its own design and to its own role as printed matter. This self-reflexion also draws attention to graphic design as a medium, emphasizing the ways in which the book was constructed, both in the physical and conceptual sense, thereby making the act of design more transparent.

Natascha and Ashkan encountered the schoolbook while taking a language course of Farsi in Teheran in 2009. This encounter took place after the Iranian Presidential elections, during a summer of massive demonstrations that filled the streets. Much like the events surrounding them, and the major shifts taking place, the book filled them both with a sense of wonder, which Ashkan described as "no less bewildering than what we would encounter parallel on the street, amongst the people, within the political discord of our then current circumstances" (Sepahvand: 3). This sense of wonder triggered a whole category of discourse concerned with signs, symptoms, and the incompatibility of what we see and what we say about it.

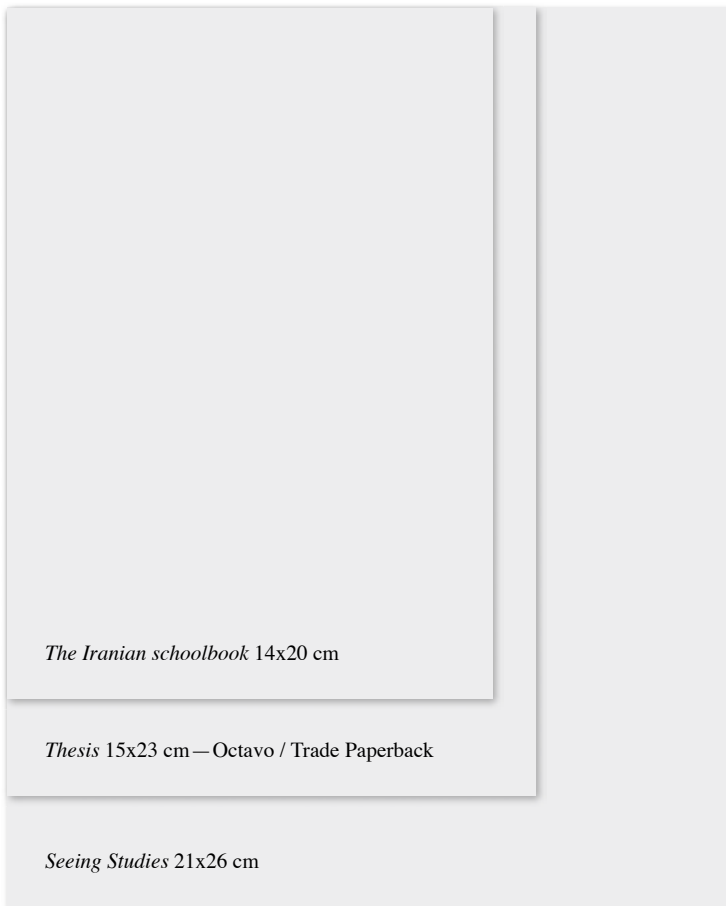
Published by the Iranian Ministry of Education in 2007 (an expanded version of the first 1981 edition), the schoolbook is used to instruct the subject of art in the first year of middle



The Iranian schoolbook's facsimile as seen when reading from right-to-left (Farsi) - p. 9, Seeing Studies

school in all state-run Iranian public schools. It is a mandatory book for all students, and is the first in a series of books that become optional when students transition into high school, as by then they choose their own academic specializations. The schoolbook's first lesson also offers its first instruction: "Look carefully at your surroundings" (*Seeing Studies*: 21). This command is constantly repeated, again and again, throughout the lessons and homework exercises planned by the book. But what are we supposed to look for, and what does this looking produce? No instruction is explicitly given as to how one should look, what constitutes something to be looked at within a surrounding, what would qualify as "careful looking," and when are things no longer visible. Yet the text continues to state that "all ancient and contemporary buildings, handmade things and industrial machine parts were first made into a plan upon paper by a draughtsman and then produced as objects" (21). This instruction presents the surroundings as an industrial model to be copied, repeated and produced. An understanding that is

fundamental in its relationship to production is that “language of line” (170), embodied and expressed by reading and writing the visual, allows for a foundation that unifies the production of art with that of industry, thereby making the “useless” into something that is “useful.” This reading suggests an attempt, especially in the context of the time in which the schoolbook was first being published, to incorporate art and design into a “productive” activity that could shape “citizens” and give “national identity” an outline that could be designed, produced and consumed (171).



Book formats and sizes in relation to each other

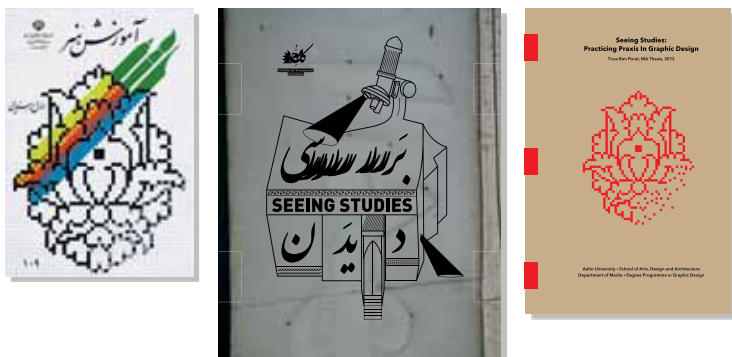
The visual examples that accompany the text throughout the schoolbook seem to extend the question of what the schoolbook proposes as a model for looking, reading and depicting. In comparison to the didactic, pedagogic text, the images the book presents seem very eclectic, almost random, almost never contextualized in time or space. The visuals range from graphic symbols and patterns, to technical drawings and diagrams, to photographs of objects, to drawings and paintings, with no clear theme or guideline to explain the choices. This eclectic selection of visual references seems to increase the incongruence between the world of one's surroundings which is full of discord, and the world of the text of the schoolbook.

Republishing the Iranian schoolbook as a part of *Seeing Studies*, giving it a new context, presentation, and form, charges it with new meanings and symbolic values. It introduces the book to new audiences, and re-introduces it to old ones, under a new prism and point of view. Thus, the common schoolbook, otherwise overlooked, changes its cultural value, seemingly without changing much of its material nature. However, things are always perceived in reference to other elements, and the schoolbook now forms a set of new relationships with the book in which it is positioned. The relationships with the new format, spread, page, and frame changes the schoolbook's original function and context, and converts its cultural value into another.

In his extensively quoted essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Walter Benjamin asserts that:

"the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object."

The holy relics of an original replication can not be placed inside a book. Rather, a book, although a product of reproduction,



*The Iranian schoolbook, *Seeing Studies*, this thesis*

is structured and devised as an original in itself, in which the images are realized as a new original. *Seeing Studies* presents the Iranian schoolbook as one voice amongst many. The different proposals and conversations that follow the schoolbook affect the schoolbook's authority not only as an object, but also as a didactic all-knowing text.

By presenting this thesis in the form of a book on another book (*Seeing Studies*), which itself contains a third book (the Iranian schoolbook), a whole new set of relationships begin to emerge. This relationship of a book within a book within a book suggests a specific process that relies on a movement forward in time: from the original schoolbook, to the book that emerged from it, and, finally, this thesis. In this sense, a book within a book creates a certain world within a world.

But a book always serves two functions: it is comprised of creative content, something that communicates and extends the format of the object into the future; but at the same time it serves as an archive, it documents the content, keeping it in a firm shape and place as a completed object. To quote the iconic phrase attributed to Stewart Brand, "information wants to be free," but it also has to be contained in order to be readable in the first place.

Translation

The mode of work on the design of *Seeing Studies* was one of translation—that is, the transformation from the conceptual to the physical object—turning the content into a self-contained entity that is the book.

Umberto Eco's description of the role of the writer holds truth for the designer as well:

"To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader, supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them." (Eco, 1979: 7)

We always read within a context, to which cultural identity is a crucial ingredient. The activity of reading may take place in our own mind, but it has a social extension. We always read in common, with fellow readers (Kinross, 2002: 342-346). When translating, the words encountered in one language cannot be assumed to have an equivalent in another target language. The difficulties we face in translation lie in cultural and social frames of reference, in modes of expression, structures and functions, or, more simply, between one person's thoughts and another's, leaving us with a space for negotiation that necessitates debate, discord and dissonance.

In the case of the Iranian schoolbook, a decision was made to retain the transliterated form of certain words from the original Farsi. These words have been arranged into a 'translation landscape' of associations and possible definitions. The idea behind this decision was, quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein, that "any general definition may be misunderstood" (Wittgenstein: 38). The words "tarrāhi" and "naqāshi," for example, bear only a partial relationship to the

meaning conveyed by one of their many possible counterparts in English: *drawing* and *painting*. The tradition that comes with drawing and painting in European languages—shaped by the development of Western art from Renaissance notions of “disegno” to the Modernist “easel painting”—does not apply congruously to these words in Farsi. To further the complexity of this matter, the words “tarrâhi” and “naqâshi” originally entered Farsi from Arabic, and their connotations in both languages differ. This adds multiple, unconscious references of association, based on whether one looks at these words from their daily use, linguistic history, or conceptual potential. The root of “naqâshi”—N-Q-SH—gives rise to words related to coloring, variation, and producing difference: the word “painting” may thus be derived from this family, just as much as “debate” or “disagreement” can. The configuration of these meanings is additionally related to the shape given to them by time: the experience of “tarrâhi” and “naqâshi” opens multiple histories of schools of seeing.

By leaving this landscape as a form of noticeable experience throughout the schoolbook’s translation, the translators’ intention was to present the text as all-too familiar, yet inevitably unfamiliar. The sketched-out lines of association provided in the translation landscape were intended to be used as the basis for a reading that refers to the simultaneous variation of form and content and to the blurring of the translation as holding a fixed meaning.

But even transliteration can not solve the problem of transition from one script and form of reading and writing to another. For, as Florian Coulmas points out, a use of a certain script “not only maps, but also imposes structure” (Coulmas: 39).

In his book *Right Hand Left Hand*, Chris McManus discusses an example that aptly demonstrates the complexity that lies at the root of translation when the script itself is a means of perception. Quoting from the book of Ecclesiastes 10:2, McManus discusses three enigmatic English versions to the following Hebrew passage:

לֵב חָכָם לִימִינוֹ, וְלֵב בָּסִיל לְשִׁמְאֹלוֹ

English Bible it appears in the following form: "The mind of the wise man faces right, but the mind of the fool faces left." A third translation mixes the hand and the heart: "A wise man's understanding is at his right hand, but a fool's heart is at his left."

These translations fail to express the metaphorical meaning behind the passage, as the Hebrew words of heart and mind, left and right, are embedded with cultural perceptions and dispositions that are missing from the English translation.

A literal translation of the passage would be: "The wise man's heart tends to his right, and the fool's heart to his left," but in the original passage the word "heart" means mind, and the word "right" refers to both strength and the past. Because Hebrew (like Farsi) is written and read from right to left, it progresses leftwards. Thus, for the Hebrew (and Farsi) speaker, time begins from the right and continues to the left. In other words, the actions of the wise man in the passage are determined by previous experiences of success that have brought him luck in the past, and because the best way to predict the future is to look at the past, the wise man will continue to be lucky in the future. This meaning embedded in the Hebrew script is completely lost in the English translations (McManus: 325)

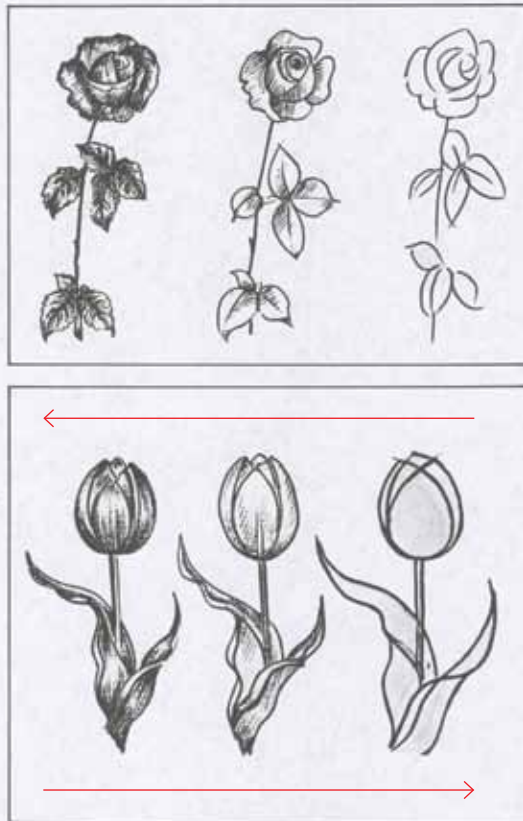
←

לֵב חָכָם לְיָמִינוֹ, וְלֵב בֹּסִיל לְשִׁמְאֵלוֹ

to his left fool heart to his right wise heart

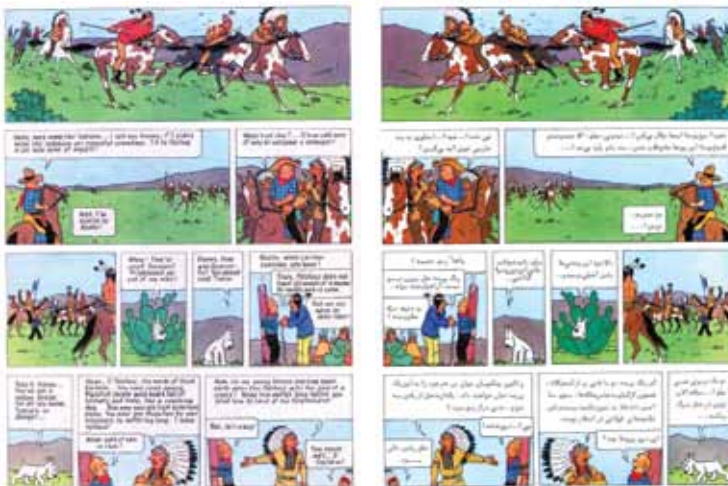
We read pictures in a certain way, just as we read texts. This form of reading is based on cultural and visual conventions, which take form as embodied reactions relating to time and space. These conventions can form certain incongruities and misunderstandings in the process of reading information, especially when transformed from one culture to another. The reading of metaphors and symbols is most challenging in this aspect. In *Seeing Studies*, Farhad Fozouni presents two examples to this very problem, based on his own experience and observations.

به مراحل طراحی هر یک از گلها توجه کنید. برای تکمیل و رنگ آمیزی آنها، از معلم هنر خود راهنمایی بخواهید.



Composing a flower—p. 49 of the Iranian schoolbook

The Iranian schoolbook presents two simple diagrams demonstrating the different stages in composing a flower. But the goal of this task transforms when the reading direction shifts. Does this exercise require you to start from the shape of a realistic flower and proceed to a simple drawing, or the other way around?



p. 21 from the book "Tintin in America" in English and in Farsi

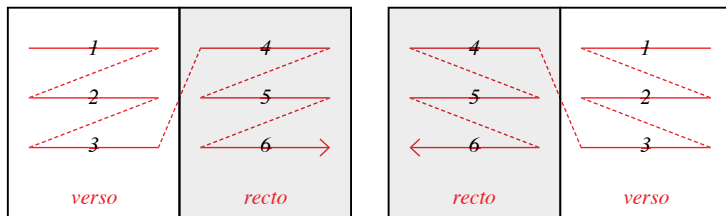
Another example can be found in the drawings of *Tintin and Milou*. Like the drawings in other comic books, the drawings of *Tintin and Milou* are mirrored when the reading direction changes. Writing Farsi in the speech bubbles requires the entire book to be printed from right to left, so the images themselves are mirrored. Growing up consuming comic books in a religious manner, and then later in life encountering the original frames in French, one seems to question what he has been seeing all along. Much like viewing your own reflection in a non-reversing mirror.

By opening up to additional languages and forms of reading, we increase our ability to think critically about language and communication systems, and to question our own cognitive patterns and mind-sets as imposed by reading conventions. This allows us to arrive at a certain distance from the way our own language organizes our experience, and grants us a new perspective on the ways in which symbolic systems are embodied in the way we read.

Multiplied Scripts and Reading Directions

A publication layout can become increasingly intricate once multilingual, especially so when the languages that comprise it make use of different scripts. Another layer of complexity is introduced with altering reading directions – right-to-left and left-to-right – as this might complicate the sequence of reading. In languages written from left-to-right, such as English, books are bound on the left side of the cover. In right-to-left languages, such as Farsi, books are bound on the right. The direction of reading influences the function each page serves—either as a *recto* or a *verso*—as the front or back side (respectively) of a bound leaf of paper. These structural problems were one of the main issues to be addressed in conceptualizing the materialization of *Seeing Studies* and determining its format.

When designing a bilingual publication there is always a question of establishing a hierarchy between the languages used. At the most basic level, English and Farsi are written and read in different directions. As a possible solution to this conflict, a leading language and script could have been chosen, while the other language be given a secondary position. This was not the intention here, as both languages were to be treated equally and given the same amount of importance. Another common solution for a book written in two opposite scripts, is opening the book from two opposite directions, so that one language begins



Reading direction English

Reading direction Farsi

where the other ends. This blurs the beginning and end of the book, especially for the bilingual reader, as the reader can not identify a clear beginning or end to the text, as both languages either end in the middle of the book or at the opening page of the other language.

In the workshop in Teheran, Farhad Fozouni suggested an original solution to this problem. By leaving the pages of the book loose, binding them by simple paper clips, the reader is the one to decide on the preferred reading direction: left-to-right or right-to-left. When the reader first encounters an unused copy of the book, they can choose how they prefer to read and bind the book. This form of binding breaks down the readers fixed perspective, and raises to their attention the possibility of an opposite reading direction, questioning the validity of their accustomed way of reading. The reader has to choose how she or he intends to read.

As a bilingual book, *Seeing Studies* has three optional readers, and the design should have addressed them all—the Farsi reader, the English reader, and the bilingual reader. Because part of the text is almost always hidden in the inner margins, the bilingual reader has to take a position and choose a language. The only way in which both languages can be read simultaneously is by removing the clips and dispersing the pages of the book.



As Seeing Studies is not permanently bound, by moving the paper clips the reader can change the reading direction



Seeing Studies when the clips are set to the right (Farsi)



Seeing Studies when the clips are set to the left (English)



Reading with the clips set to the right (Farsi), pp. 54-55, Seeing Studies



Reading with the clips set to the left (English), pp. 54-55, Seeing Studies

Form and Format

Which kind of design is the suitable one? What makes sense? What is necessary? According to book designer Jost Hochuli, the answer to these questions is that one should design in a way which appears to be the most appropriate for the content and for the reader (Jost Hochuli and Robin Kinross: 11-30). The solutions proposed in the design of *Seeing Studies* aimed to offer suitable versions, variations, and interpretations to the book's content, taking under consideration the larger questions that the book presents.

The Object

In the process of designing a book, the designer can take the position of a translator, visual author, dramatic advisor, and stage director all at once. He is, after all, responsible for the book's conceptual structure. The book becomes a stage, and through its layout a rhythm is created. As our ways of seeing are governed by tradition, so it is when reading and looking at books. Generally speaking, the structure of a book, with regards to its content, is predetermined. Having opened its cover, we leaf through the endpapers, the half title, the list of contents, the introduction, the first chapter, and so on. In almost all cases this order makes sense, as it is one that we have grown accustomed to over several centuries. But the widespread well-known codex is not necessarily the exclusive form for a book. In this sense, *Seeing Studies* follows a long list of examples of books questioning this tradition and suggesting another interpretation to the familiar format. The design structure and binding of *Seeing Studies* constitutes an interpretive intervention in book structure, offering a visual and structural response to a particular linguistic and visual research.

A book is always an object, determined by the human hand and the human eye. When dealing with books, graphic design crosses over into the territory of product design. Books are

three-dimensional objects of which the designer must consider aesthetic, functional, and structural aspects. In his introduction to the book *Graphic Forms, Art as Related to the Book*, Gyorgy Kepes suggests the designer should:

"Rethink the book functions in their physical, optical and psychological aspects. A book has weight, size, thickness and tactile qualities, qualities which are handled by the hand, as its optical form is handed by the eye." (Kepes: 8)

Robin Kinross expands Kepes's argument and calls for the need for a book to become an object from which dialogue can be formed:

"There has to be something—in the text or image, in the way these are configured and made material—that allows a place for dialogue: a foothold, or perhaps an 'eye-and-handhold', in which the reader can grip, and then have a place from which to respond. This refers to the way in which the words are written, to the nature of the images, but also to the qualities of their material embodiments: disposition of information, the visual forms in which it is configured, texture and color of substrate, the bulk and weight of the object, the way it flexes in your hands, and so on—into innumerable small considerations." (Kinross, 1994: 24)

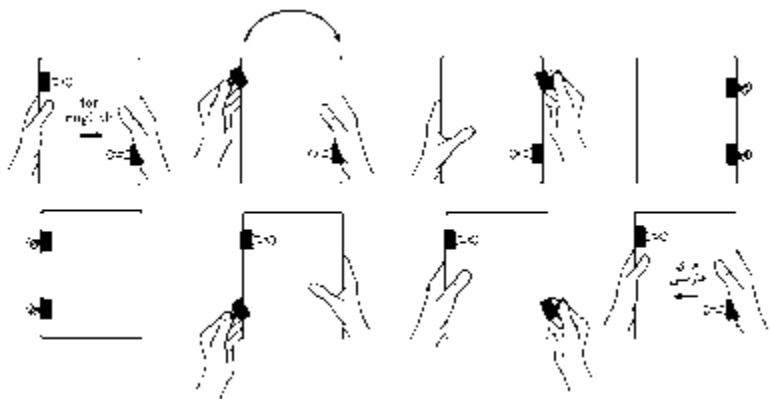
While designing *Seeing Studies*, the book was very much considered as a functional object. It was intended to be read and discussed, and there was a clear intention when choosing the book's format and layout to step away from both the coffee-table and the academic formats. The paper clip binding offered a solution to issues concerning the two reading directions in *Seeing Studies*, but brought up new problems regarding the book's practicality and accessibility as an object. The clip binding is not very easy to set initially, as the clips themselves are quite stiff and hard to open. This requires for the book to be held with both hands in order for it to remain open, demanding a more physically involved engagement on the part of the reader. This also determined the format of the book, and called

for a wider layout and larger proportions compared to a regular reading book.

Seeing Studies has two material covers. In order to protect the book from damaging while stocked, there was a need to cover the clips and add an additional outer layer to its package. This additional layer is composed of two cardboards placed at the front and back of the book. The book is then wrapped by shrink plastic. The cardboard chosen was the most common corrugated fiberboard, suggesting this cover was intended to serve as a shipping container.

The first interaction with *Seeing Studies* demands readers to position themselves in regards to the book. In order to turn the book into a useful object, readers are required to make a choice between languages and perceptions. In that sense, the book becomes more democratic, as the readers have to form the binding themselves and structure the book themselves to be able to read it. The lack of a fixed binding exposes the book as a container, and the vessel becomes more open and transparent.

The substantially different parts and contributions that form *Seeing Studies* demanded custom made solutions, where the design changed according to the content, but still remained within the framework and layout that determine the character of the book as a self-contained whole. In the following pages I will discuss specific choices made during the design process. As the



Instructions for placing the clips, Seeing Studies back cover

process of working on the book was a collaboration, some issues more than others were subject to dispute and controversy. I will expand on these issues when reviewing the dynamics of the decision making process.



*Opening Seeing Studies:
removing the plastic wrapping and the cardboard cover*



*Adjusting the clips according to the chosen reading direction.
In this case, English*

Choosing the Typefaces

Typography is always an interpretation of a text. Choosing the font sets the tone and voice the text transmits and communicates. As Jost Hochuli points out:

"Typefaces—regardless of their optical legibility—trigger particular feelings on the part of readers simply through their appearance, and can have a positive or negative impact. This seems to be pragmatic evidence to show that, over and above their primary and essential task of acting as a visual means of transport for language, typefaces are also able to communicate atmosphere." (Hochuli: 54)

When setting the type and considering fonts for *Seeing Studies*, there were a few initial concerns to take under consideration, the most important of those being the relationship between the two scripts in the book, Farsi and English, and the variety of different voices and forms of expression they take in the book. Because the most substantial amount of text in the book was to be presented in the conversations, the process of choosing and setting the type began there.

When using two languages side-by-side there is always a question of juxtaposing two scripts. A multitude of scripts can greatly limit the use of formal and typographic elements, as the linguistic data itself is so loaded. This constraint, as well as the wish to work with typography in a simple manner, were the main reasons why only two font families were used throughout the book.

Comparing the two scripts used in the book—Latin and Perso-Arabic—it is clear that there are hardly any shared typographic measurements and equivalents. The two scripts differ in their writing directions, in one consisting of joining characters while the other of separate characters, and in a very strong calligraphic influence on the one and an independent typographic aesthetic on the other. When the two scripts are set together, we face various script and language dependent problems such as different beginnings and endings, varying text lengths, different apparent text sizes, and unbalanced color of text blocks on the page.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. ا ب ج د ه و ز ح ط ی
 x-high
 base line
 ک ل م ن س ع ف ص ق ر ش ت
 ث خ ذ ض ط غ.

The two fonts used in Seeing Studies: Thesis (TheSerif) and Nazanin

The design work on the type was divided between Farhad Fozouni and Image-Shift, as Farhad was to set the Farsi text and Image-Shift the English. This division of work was one of the initial decisions taken regarding the design process, as a designer educated in a Latin-script dominated environment will necessarily perceive the Perso-Arabic script in a different manner than a designer who is a native reader of the script.

As mentioned before, the process of choosing the type for *Seeing Studies* began with testing the longer conversation texts. Our first intuition for choosing the Latin typeface was to use a slab-serif font, which felt less didactic, and held less connotations to other textual references.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Thesis : TheSerif, Regular and Bold, 12 pt

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Thesis : TheSans Regular and Bold, 12 pt

The Latin font used in *Seeing Studies* is *Thesis*, a large typeface "superfamily" designed by Dutch designer Lucas de Groot between 1994 and 1999, with the intention to provide a

modern humanist, useful-yet-friendly, all-purpose type system. Two families of the font were used in the book. *TheSans*, a sans-serif font family, used for setting the shorter texts in the book, such as the translation of the Iranian schoolbook and the image captions, but also for commentary texts and footnotes. *TheSerif*, a slab-serif font family, in which the main texts of the conversations were set. Both fonts are low-contrast typefaces – i.e., the differences between thin and thick strokes are not very pronounced – yet the reference to writing with the broad-nibbed pen is still present, giving the letters a diagonal stress and a forward flow that facilitates reading.

ابجد هوز حطى کلمن سعفص قرشت تخذ ضظغ
ابجد هوز حطى کلمن سعفص قرشت تخذ ضظغ

Nazanin (16 pt)

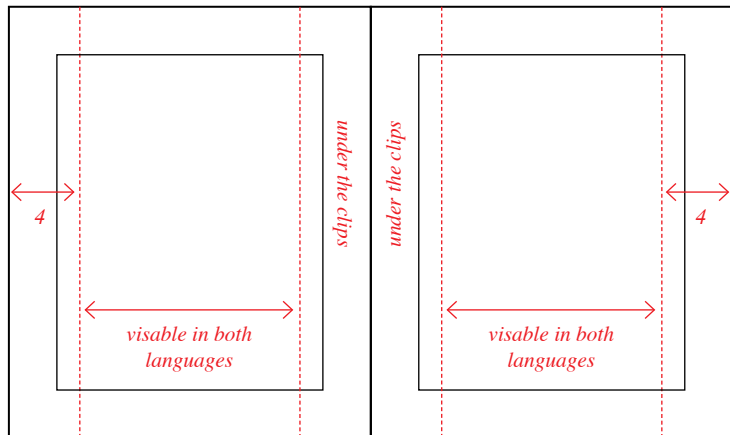
The Farsi font was chosen and set by Farhad Fozouni. The number of Perso-Arabic typefaces available on the market is marginal compared to the number of Latin designs. It is quite remarkable that the users of one of the widest spread scripts in the world are confined to only a few dozen typefaces suitable for setting large amounts of text. Because printed script used to be inferior to the high level of calligraphy, mechanical text production spread slowly throughout the Arab world. Only with the 20th century, and the beginning of mass production and communication, the high demand for print-production outweighed the concerns about aesthetic values (Safadi: 2-7).

As one of the concerns in relation to the choice of typefaces for the book was the relationships formed between the Perso-Arabic and Latin scripts, the main focus was set on closeness in color and size between the two scripts, rather than on the form of the characters. Thus, although there is an Arabic variant for two of the *Thesis* typeface families (*TheMix Arabic* and *TheSans Arabic*), the font chosen for the book was *Nazanin*, a text-face specially designed for Farsi typesetting, first produced by Linotype in 1978. *Nazanin* is characterized by counters and inter-character proportions characteristic of Persian display lettering and typography.

Bringing Things Together

The three parts that form *Seeing Studies*, *Drawing and Painting*, *Propose and Vary* and *Spoken and Heard*, each have their own specific characteristics: *Drawing and Painting* presents a facsimile and serves as a documentation of another book; *Propose and Vary* serves as a form of collective space presenting various interpretations and proposals in various formats by various contributors; and *Spoken and Heard* presents a set of conversations, offering an in-depth discussion inquiring into the ways in which we learn to see. The inherent differences in the content and context of the three parts of the book, perhaps held the main challenge in the design of *Seeing Studies*. The design of the book needed to truly articulate multiplicity, to search for forms and techniques that give voice to the many different participants and collaborators and their different views and perspectives. The book was intended to be an object that is both whole and interrupted, to present a cohesive and communicating self-contained object that is simultaneously a form of incongruous translation in itself, leaving room for negotiation that calls for debate, discord and dissonance.

The element that most determined the layout of the book was the use of paper clips for binding. These clips required large inner



Page layout, *Seeing Studies*



*Reading the schoolbook in Farsi
pp. 20-21, Seeing Studies*

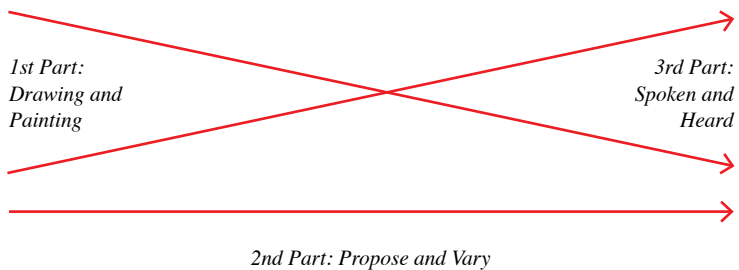


*Reading the schoolbook in English with translation on the margins
pp. 40-41, Seeing Studies*

margins, reducing almost 4 cm from the visible size of each page, hidden under the fold. These margins suggested a layout and grid that made a clear distinction between the chosen language and the marginal language. As the book is read in one script, the other text is pushed under the curve, partly or completely hidden by the clips. This decision had both practical and conceptual reasoning and was to determine the grid and page layout throughout the entire book.

In the first chapter of the book, *Drawing and Painting*, the margins allow for the English translation of the Iranian schoolbook to be either visible or invisible according to the chosen reading language. Since the schoolbook facsimile and translation were the first materials to arrive, they set the initial tone and grid for the book within a book, which was applied in additional sections of *Seeing Studies*. The use of the margins for translation is repeated in several other pages of *Seeing Studies*, in cases in which an image contained a text that required translation.

In the second chapter of the book, *Propose and Vary*, the major concern was creating a certain rhythm and narrative to the order in which the contributions were presented. During the workshop held on the last weekend of October 2010, all the printed proposals were laid out on the floor, allowing both designers and editors to get a better overview of the material at hand. Playing with the printouts like a puzzle, changing the order and position in which the pages were presented, assisted in understanding the kind of narrative required. At the end of a long session of discussions, Natascha proposed the following diagram that set the standard as to how the content was to be evaluated:



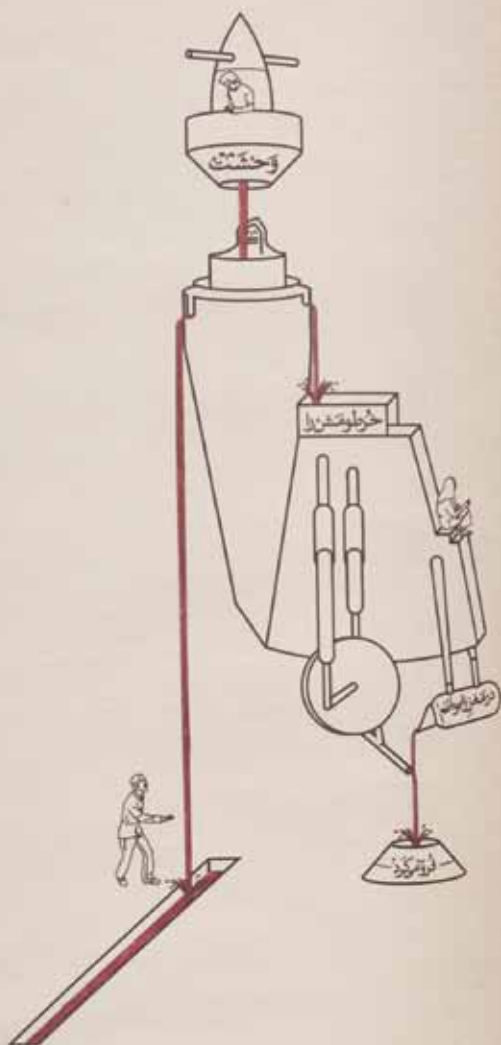
Fear

thrust its trunk¹

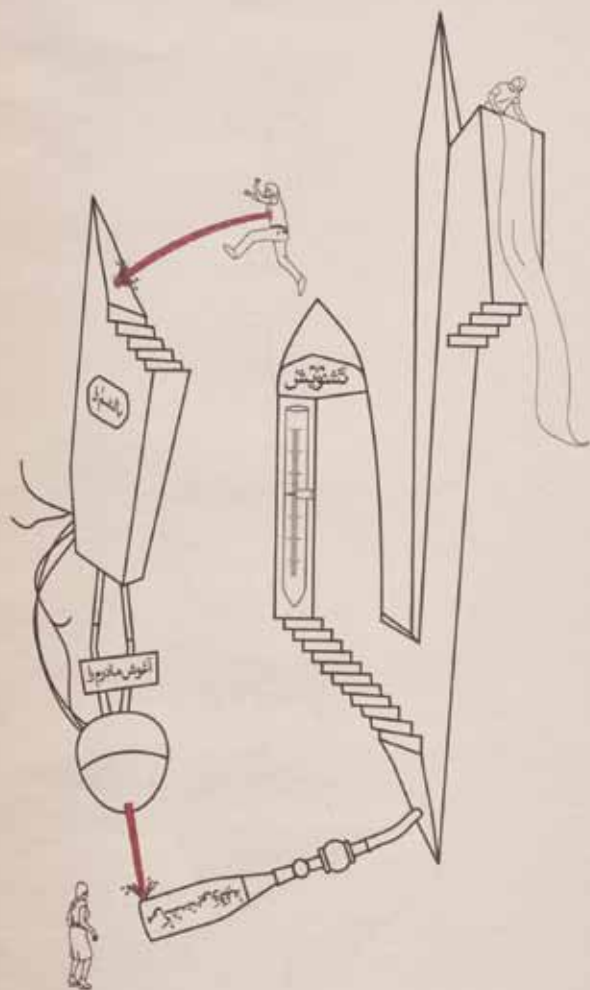
into the marrow

of my knees²

- 1 and was sucking
up my power
2 my knees were
loose, as if not there



و در آن زمان که من در آنجا بودم
و در آن زمان که من در آنجا بودم



۱- در ماشین بخود گریه و در معجزه از جراحات میگذشت.
۲- مثل چرخ خیاطی ای که جای سوزن - چاقو سوزن بسته باشند.

Confusion

'was killing constantly'

my pillow¹

my mother's embrace

- 1 like a sewing machine with a knife in place of the needle
- 2 had penetrated my pillow, licking my brain surgically



*Reading in Farsi with translation on the margins, Propose and Vary contribution
"On & On & On & On", pp. 130-131, Seeing Studies*

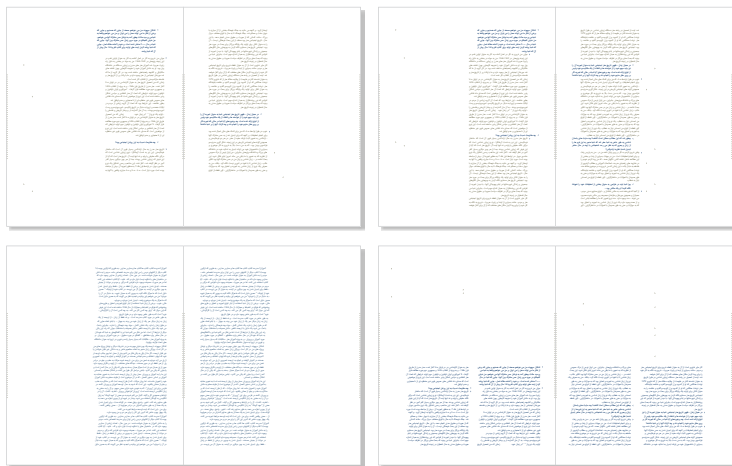


*Reading in English, Propose and Vary contribution
"On & On & On & On", pp. 126-127, Seeing Studies*

The contributions in *Propose and Vary* offer a large variety of expression. They are all interpretations and reflections on the Iranian schoolbook, but some remain closer to it while others turn to wider discourses regarding learning and seeing. Natascha's diagram suggested that the proposals should be used as a way to form a transition between the first part of the book—the documented schoolbook—and the third part—the more open-ended conversations.

The third and longest part of *Seeing Studies, Spoken and Heard*, presents four different conversations. Although the typesetting and general layout of the conversations is consistent in all four conversations, each conversation slightly differs in design according to the content and structure of its specific discourse.

The conversations are structured and "staged" on the page in the form of a dialogue between two speakers, the editors and the interlocutors invited by them. In order to easily identify the speaker while reading, there was a need to differentiate the two voices, as well as the two languages, present on the page. During the design process, a large variety of optional layouts was tested and discussed in a search for the correct balance between languages and speakers, keeping the flow of the conversation.



Variations for the conversation layouts

بگویم که مشکلی که گشتی بمنظوم فقط مشکل معلم نیست، کل سازو کاری است که محکم جبهه شده و جایی هیچ تردیدی باقی نمی‌گسلارد جمعی کلاس، آرایش معلم و شاگردان، تئیل‌ها و زینک‌ها، فذکون‌ها و قدبلندها، توالی موضوع‌ها، صراحت شرح درس‌ها و در نهایت نتیجه‌ی مطلوب از پیش مقرر شده، دست‌نهیست هم می‌دهد که همه دنبال لحظاتی گریز باشند پدر و مادر من معلم بودند و شک ندارم که این معلم هم اگر می‌توانست، بدون اجبار و بدون درنگ، با کمال میل، خودش از کلاس بیرون می‌جست.

بدیهی است معلمی که جایی برای شک و مراجع نامعجون نمی‌گذارد، در دام خودش افتاده است. کلاس درس زمانی برای هر دو دسته می‌شود و باقرانی دانی اموزان و اکتبی آشنایی است به همین محدودیت جالب است بستم که راه‌های گریز معلمان از این دام چه می‌تواند باشد اما برگردیم به معماری خواندند. در معماری دست‌کم واحدهای ریاضی بی‌ناشنید که به آن‌ها پناه ببری؟

در ساختمان بعضی دیوارها هستند که فقط در فضایی نقش دارند، بعضی دیگر در ایستایی آن هم مؤثرند که به آن‌ها دیوار باربر یا حمال می‌گویند. ریاضاتی که در معماری می‌خواندیم، ریاضیات حمال بود، چیزهایی مثل علم مناظر و مراهبا یا همان پرسپکتیو و همین‌طور رسم فنی یا طراحی مکانیکی که حکمت کشیدن اشیا، از منظر جهات آریعه بود.

و همه‌ی این‌ها شد که قید دانشگاه رفتن را زد.

قبل از آن که دانشگاه را ول کنم، در همان سال اول شنیدیم که معمار جوان و خوش‌سلیقه‌یی به اسم رضا دانشمیر در خانه‌اش کلاس جالبی درس‌های تئوری معماری دارد. از آن‌جا که از دانشگاه قطع امید کرده بودم، سر کلاسی او رفتم. معلوم شد که او فقط راجع به معماری صرف حرف نمی‌زند و از معماری در کل هنرهای تجسمی و ادبیات و هر چیز دیگری که برایش جالب بود صحبت می‌کرد. همان‌جا بود که برای اولین بار اسم دوشال به گوشم خورد و چشمم به حمال نوشتن روشن شد که الحق برای غلط فروختن‌دیده، چشمه‌ی زلال جوشایی بود. تا آن زمان چیز چندانی درباره‌ی هنرهای تجسمی نمی‌دانستیم، اما الان فکر می‌کنم که اتفاقاً همان نوع باگانی که از ریاضی به آرت برده بودم، درک نوآوری دوشال است. است تا مثلاً نگاه حاصل از نقاشی ابدی این که چه‌طور با انتخاب نام‌گذاری و تغییر بستر می‌شود خلق کرد و این خلاف‌الامر است تا ساختن چیزی با دست‌های خواننده به مذاقم بسیار خوش آمد خیلی زود هنر برایم جالب شد و تکلیفم روشن شد که هنر و همین‌طور سینما را بیش‌تر از معماری دوست دارم، خصوصاً که در آن خراب‌شده‌ی دانشگاه علوم‌صنعت باشد.

Issues are discussed that have to do with solidarity and dynamics taking precedence over obedience. The problem of miscommunication between teacher and knowing that is hardly addressed, though. It would be interesting to know a 'third case' in which the teacher has to leave the classroom. Students suggest conditions under which he can return. You used to sit on the rooftop and solve problems with the teacher. What are your thoughts on a 'third case'?

Given what I have said as well as my pleasurable experience of not having a teacher, I definitely agree with your suggestion. Let me just say that, in my opinion, the problem does not only belong to the teacher, but also to the whole structure, which is firmly arranged and leaves no room for doubt. The classroom box, the composition of the teacher and students—smart and lazy, short and tall—the order of things and the self-evident clarity of the curriculum, and finally the already predetermined, desired results all lead to prevent seeking a moment of escape. My parents were teachers and I have no doubt that if this teacher could have done as he would have—without force or hesitation—pumped out of the class window of his own volition.

Clearly, a teacher who can't allow for doubt or discussion of reference between student and teacher is trapped in his own role. The classroom becomes a confinement for parties. Disobedience of the students is a known mutation of confinement. It would be interesting to see what, for him, the escape routes from the trap could be. But back to the reality of your architecture studies. Do you at least have courses on mathematics in architecture as an escape route for yourself?

In construction, there are walls that play a role in defining space. Other walls support and conduct weight in a structure and are called bearing walls. The sort of mathematics we used in architecture was mechanics: things such as statics, dynamics, the science of perspective, and technical drawing—culminating in the wisdom of how to draw objects from four different points of view.

And is that why you gave up your academic studies?

Before giving up my studies, in the very first year I took about a young architect named Reza Daneshmir who had an interesting class on architectural theory in his home. I had lost my faith in the university. I attended his class. There he discussed architecture along with the visual arts, literature and whatever else was of interest to him. It was there that

architect of the head of Islamic architecture were purged for them. The deputy had university?

Of course, they get the conditions. Mahbubi has there is no cannot communicate. The professors to their dialog. When someone not want to his or her status, to have

You speak of the different points of view. The student teacher is deciding on the if you cannot or you cannot see. For me, the question is: How can I use a schematic model, sitting on their from a monotonous the teacher turn

—40. 131.

Yes. He is drawn to decide to respond. Student could be could even say that a question or a But the teacher and does not seem it as a provocation. The wrong places it depends the last. The film then decision made to

architecture, but, actually, it was mostly an ideological conflict. The lead of our faculty believed that modern architecture was Islamic architecture. Interesting people who had taught there were purged and the "forces of good" had come to substitute for them. It was a well-known case that the administrative deputy had attempted during his years as a student at the university to "put" a Qur'anic verse into perspective:

لَا وَكُنْتُمْ زِمًا يَتَخَفَتُونَ

Of course, this lends itself to perception with some difficulty, yet the conditions set by the scene are illuminating. As Jacques Mubebbi has himself decreed, "If you know what I mean, there is no need for further explanation; if you do not, we cannot communicate." Our situation was dire; I mean, fundamentally there was no intention to encourage students and professors to approach one another, in order to give meaning to our dialogue. The concept of taste is inherently hierarchical. When somebody talks about his or her taste, he or she does not want to communicate. This person is, in fact, guarding his or her privilege to exercise taste. It is an expression of status, to have the final say in the teacher-student relationship.

You speak of taste as a language of power and distinction of different positions in a hierarchy, the hierarchy here being the student-teacher relationship. The teacher exercises a certain power by deciding on the working language of the learning process, and you cannot or do not want to speak in that working language, you cannot communicate.

For me, the quote you mention is evocative of the first scene in Kiarostami's film *First Case, Second Case*. You see a teacher drawing a schematic model on the blackboard while the students are sitting on their benches watching him. The room is silent, apart from a monotonous, rhythmic knocking that appears as soon as the teacher turns his back on the class to draw—

—as ear.

Yes. He is drawing an ear. Interestingly, and one of the students decides to respond with a rhythmic knock. The noise produced by the student could be seen as a response to the ear on the blackboard. You could even say that it is, in fact, a very precise response, maybe even a question or a comment. Both try to enlighten how the ear works. But the teacher has decided upon a different working language and does not understand the question posed by the knock. He just reacts as a provocation, and so then he urges the students to reveal the wrongdoer so he can punish him. When nobody responds he suspends the last two rows from class for a whole week.

The film then continues with interviews of people about the decision made by the students not to give away the knocking kid.

بود که گفتوگو معنایی داشته باشد. مفهوم «سلیقه» ذاتاً سلسله‌مراتبی است. یعنی کسی که از سلیقه‌اش صحبت می‌کند، قصدش ارتباط نیست، عملاً دارد از امکان اعمال سلیقه‌اش حراست می‌کند. یعنی بیان جایگاه است. چیزی که عموماً در رابطه‌ی استاد و شاگردی حرف اول را می‌زند.

تو از سلیقه همچون زبان قدرت و فرقی‌گذاری جایگاه‌های متفاوت در یک سلسله‌مراتب حرف می‌زنی. سلسله‌مراتبی که این‌جا رابطه‌ی معلم و شاگردی است. معلم قدرت مشخصی را از طریق انتخاب نوع زبان آموزشی اعمال می‌کند و اگر نتوانی با نواهی که به آن زبان صحبت کنی نمی‌توانی ارتباط برقرار کنی. حرفی که نقل کردی من را به یاد صحنه‌ی اول قضیه‌ی شکل اول، شکل دوم کلاس‌نمی می‌اندازد. معلمی را می‌بینید که طرحی را روی تخته‌سیاه می‌کشد، در حالی که شاگردها روی نیمکت‌هایشان بنشینده‌اند و او را تماشا می‌کنند. اتاق ساکت است، فقط هر وقت معلم پشتش را به کلاس می‌کند که طرحش را بکشد، صدای تفت‌تفت انگشت و مگناوختی به‌راه می‌افتد.

و دارد یک گوش می‌کشد.

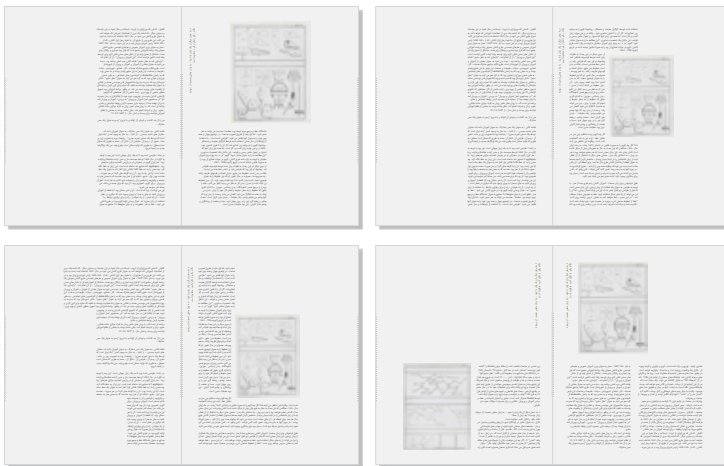
بله، حالب است که او دارد یک گوش می‌کشد و یکی از شاگردها هم تصمیم می‌گیرد که با این تفت‌تفت جواب بدهد. یعنی سر و صدایی را که آن شاگرد راه می‌اندازد، می‌شود پاسخی در نظر گرفت به آن گوش روی تخته‌سیاه. می‌شود گفت که در واقع پاسخ بسیار دقیق و به‌جایی هم هست، یا شاید هم اصلاً یک سؤال است یا یک اظهار نظر. هر دو می‌خواهند در باب طرز کار گوش روشنگری کنند، اما معلم تصمیمش را گرفته و زبان دیگری انتخاب کرده و سؤالی را که به هشت تفت‌تفت در آمده نمی‌فهمد. برای او این فقط یک تحریک است و به همین دلیل مضمرانه از شاگردان می‌خواهد که خاموشی را معرفی کنند تا او را تشنه کند. وقتی که هیچ کس جواب نمی‌دهد، او دو ردیف آخر را برای یک هفته‌ی تمام از کلاس اخراج می‌کند.

فیلم بنا بر مضامین‌های دربار‌ی تصمیم شاگردان برای لو دادن آن بچه ادامه پیدا می‌کند. در باب همسنگی و کار گروهی علیه سرسپردگی و اطاعت بحث می‌شود اما تقریباً به مشکل عدم ارتباط معلم و شاگردی که تفت‌تفت می‌کند اشاره‌ای نمی‌شود. حالب است که «قضیه‌ی شکل سوم» را خیال کنیم که این بار معلم است که می‌بایست کلاس را ترک کند و شاگردان‌اند که می‌گویند او تحت چه شرایطی می‌تواند برگردد. تو که عادت داشتی روی پشت‌بام بنشین و بدون معلم مسئله حل کنی. نظرت درباره‌ی این «شکل سوم» چیست؟

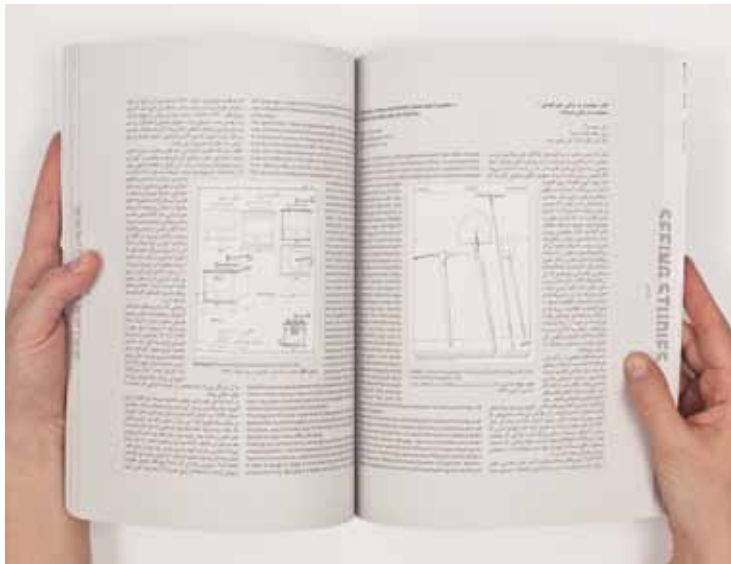
من با حرف‌هایی که زدم و تجربه‌ی لذت‌بخش معلومات‌اشتم، حتماً با پیشنهاد تو موافقم. فقط این را

In the chosen version, the two voices are differentiated by color and position, with the interlocutor's voice forming the main column of text, which the editorial voice interrupts and invades. The grid used for the conversations divides each page vertically into two sections, placing each language on different sides of this divide. Thus, the chosen language is always set on the visible outer half of the page, while the other language is swallowed into the spine. The type was aligned as justified text in both languages in order to create a clarity of structure within each page, so as to help distinguish the different speakers and languages from each other. As the texts have different lengths in English and in Farsi, the width of the columns changed according to the length of the text.

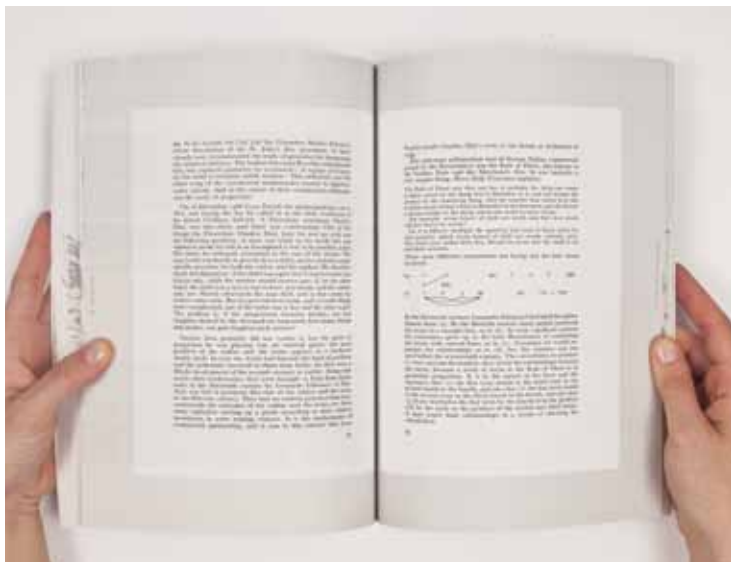
The commentary pages that accompany the conversations were washed in light gray to distinguish them from the main text. In coloring the commentary pages, we intended to address another concern regarding the presentation of canonical works of art. Many of the works of art discussed in the third part of *Seeing Studies* have become icons that are more associated with their reproductions than with the original works of art and the political and social positions they stand for. In placing these images on a non-white page, we intended to present them as reproductions open to discussion, and not as relics placed on a pedestal.



Variations for the commentary layouts



Commentary text for the conversation with Molly Nesbit, "Ongoing Transmissions," pp. 170-171, Seeing Studies



Mathematical problem from the conversation with Shahab Fotouhi, "These Fish Were Dead," pp. 206-207, Seeing Studies

The first conversation with Molly Nesbit (*Ongoing Transmissions*) is introduced by a commentary text written by Ashkan. The images discussed in the commentary text are presented as part of the introduction, and are placed in specific locations in relation to the text, within the body of the text itself or on separate pages. When set within the text, the images are placed at the center of the page, forming an axis around which the text is organized in a similar manner to the design of a mediaeval manuscript, adding an additional layer to the design. Collecting all images and commentary into the introduction leaves the conversation itself as an undisrupted continuous text.

The second conversation with Shahab Fotouhi (*These Fish Were Dead*) begins and concludes with a set of mathematical problems presented as facsimiles of their original published versions. The keys to these problems are presented as an addendum at the end of the book. The conversation itself is accompanied by two images placed on recto pages separate from the text.



*Footnotes for the conversation with Oya Pancaroğlu,
"Paths of Wonder," pp. 244-245, Seeing Studies*



The third conversation with Oya Pancaroðlu (*Paths of Wonder*) is the most academic in its structure. Thus, the commentary is presented as footnotes, and the images are placed in separate pages in relation to specific points of reference within the text, thereby distinguishing between the two types of information, and creating two independent flows of reading.

The images accompanying the fourth and last conversation with Reza Haeri (*Top Hats and Shadows*) are presented as endnotes, first as a list and then each image on a separate page.

Perhaps the most consistent elements in the book's layout are the page numbers and indicators. These elements, placed in set positions on the page, serve as a kind of template, assisting the reader to find their place within the book, and to retrieve information when leafing through it. The page numbers are always visible in one language only, as they are set on the outer and inner margins, and are viewed according to the chosen language and reading direction. The indicators of the other language, the one not chosen, are always to remain hidden under the clips.

Other repeating elements in the book are the dividing spreads introducing each chapter and each conversation in *Spoken and Heard*. These dividers present the chapter titles and are characterized by repeated graphic patterns. Their main object is to form a pause in the reading, to allow the reader to "wash their eyes" before stepping into a new section of the book. The patterns, as well as the conversation titles, translation landscape, and cover illustration, were all designed by Farhad Fozouni.

As the book was not to be bound, designing the book's package and presentation demanded other considerations to be taken into account. The spine of a book usually is an important aspect in designing a book's cover. When a book is stacked up or stored on a shelf, the information presented on the spine becomes the only information visible. As *Seeing Studies* is not bound and its spine is a block of paper secured with clips, the title of the book was printed on the foreedge. As the clips can be placed on both sides of the book, the book's title was also printed on both foreedges, in both English and Farsi, according to the chosen reading direction.



Seeing Studies spine - foredge print - in both Farsi and English

The design of the book cover was one of the most debated issues in the work process. Because the publication is concerned with ideas and dialogues, there was a need for the cover to present a certain editorial and curatorial stance. Thus, there was a general understanding that none of the images presented within the book could be extracted for its cover. A strong iconic graphic unit on the cover could assist with bringing the different components of the book together into a whole unit, but the question what that graphic unit should consist of remained disputed. The discussions revolved around finding the correct balance between interpretation and descriptiveness that would allow the cover to convey the book's content, while trying to avoid both unattainable (and undesirable) objectivity and over-interpretation. Although there was no consensus over the chosen cover, its idiosyncratic nature felt right for both Natscha and Ashkan.

مجله اسلامی (مجله)





NATIONAL ANTHEM
OF THE ISLAMIC
REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Eastern sun rises
from the horizon,
the light in the eyes of
the believers of truth,
[the mouth of] Bahman
is the high point
of our faith.
Your message, O Imam,
of independence and
freedom, is a torch
upon our flag.
O martyr, your crest
are etched in the
stars of time.
May you remain
lasting and eternal,
the Islamic
Republic of Iran

Since throughout the
country 2000 Riyl
1388 (2009)

ISBN: 964-01-00463-2

سرود ملی
جمهوری اسلامی ایران



سر زار افق، مخرطادان
فروغ دیده حق باوران
بمن، منتهایانست
پایت امی امام
استقلال آزادی نقش جانست
شیدان پیسیده و کوشن مان منیه زمان
پایند و مانی و جاودان
جمهوری اسلامی ایران

شابک ۹۶۴-۰۵-۰۰۴۰۰-۲



۱۳۸۹ ریال - ۴۰۰۰ سراسر کشور

Translation: Author
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Collaborative Work

There is a great difference between working for and working with. In the former, someone in charge tightly controls the project, drawing in others as consultants and workers as needed. In the latter, a group of people share knowledge, work together, form a dialogue, and make critical decisions together. Reflecting on The Architects' Collaborative,¹ Walter Gropius wrote in 1953 that the essence of the collective was "to emphasize individual freedom of initiative instead of authoritative direction by a boss. Synchronizing all individual efforts by a continuous give and take of its members, a team can raise its integrated work to higher potentials than the sum of the work of just as many individuals" (qtd. in Graham: 368). Making this idealistic vision of collaborative work a reality is, however, not easy to achieve.

Throughout the work process on *Seeing Studies*, there was a general understanding of the collaborative dimension of the project. Although the project was initiated by *The Institute for Incongruous Translation* (Natascha and Ashkan), the design process was framed as a collaborative course of action. It was marked by shared decision making, a give-and-take of ideas exchanged and explored, and the effort to integrate multiple perspectives into a synthesis that was commonly agreed upon. This method of work met quite a few challenges, the most significant being the language barrier and time restraints for the final production. Work was conducted mainly in English, which is not the mother tongue of any of the collaborators, but served as the common language, with Natascha and Ashkan serving at times as translators and interpreters when communicating with collaborators in Teheran. Another difficulty inherent to the project, was the geographical distance between Berlin and Teheran, which caused an inconsistency in interaction that affected the ability to form constant, direct, and straightforward communication.

1 The Architects' Collaborative (TAC) was an architectural firm formed by Gropius and seven younger architects in 1946 in Cambridge, Mass.

These gaps in communication were overcome by using a variety of technical tools, such as email, Skype and Dropbox, which allowed for a more constant connectivity, but this too had to be managed and caused delays in the work schedule. Also, the political tension, very much felt in Iran at the time following the oppression of the Green Movement, called for a more cautious conduct of communication when exchanging materials.

At first, the work was established as a complete collaboration with no specific roles divided between the designers. When the materials arrived from the editors, the work process started with a reading of the text and initial proposals were sketched. These sketches were shared between all collaborators using a common Dropbox folder and an exchange or 'ping-pong' of ideas and comments began.

Although this work method proved to be quite easy technically, the process took longer than initially anticipated, mainly due to time and schedule differences. A month or so into the work process, it became clear that not all the discussions and considerations that took place in the studio could be aptly communicated via these techniques, and face to face meetings proved to be much more productive and essential to the project's progress. These meetings allowed for better engagement and helped to keep the project's goals in focus, but often excluded Farhad, who was only updated in retrospect.

Engaging in collaborative activity demands one's professional ego to be on hold, as decision making is shared with individuals with different backgrounds, perceptions, and skills. It requires constant attention shifts between project and relationships, between personal and group points of view, and between one's own disciplinary perspective and that of others (Helmet Poggenphol: 147). The relationships between the different participants in the design process was quite dynamic, and although there was a general understanding and agreement on a collective position regarding the matters that lay at the core of the project, there were quite a few differences and variations in perspective and position. The process of designing and producing the book brought into view previously unnoticed problems, many times making differences visible and real rather than smoothing them away.

One of those differences in approaches was the amount of intervention that felt appropriate in each other's work. As the design work in Berlin was carried out with the designers sitting in the same room, it was quite easy and effortless to comment on each other's work, exchange files, and modify them. Creating the same work relationship was not possible when working with Farhad from afar, as things were not as immediate, and communication was much more demanding.

At a certain point during the work process, it became clear that Farhad was less involved in determining the book's layout and general design. This was caused both by technical circumstances (language and location) and by the different roles Farhad and Image-Shift played in the project. When the project was first set up, distinctive roles were not established, but it was clear that Image-Shift would take responsibility for the book's production, as the studio has extensive experience in this field, and the book was to be printed in Germany by a German publisher. As the work on the design progressed, the differences between the roles the designers took became clearer: Image-Shift facilitated the project, and were in charge of the layout, grid, production, typography, and image treatment, and Farhad created elements that were more expressive—relating more to the package or surface of the book and less to its structure—such as the dividing patterns, conversation titles, and the cover of the book. This division of responsibilities between the designers was never thoroughly discussed, and occurred mainly due to time constraints. It also influenced the collaborative aspect of the work, as Farhad's contributions were perceived more as artistic expressions, products of his authorship, and were less open to intervention.

A work produced by one author can speak with many different voices, just as a group can choose to speak with a single voice. A higher headcount of collaborators in itself does not produce a more democratic form of practice. Because in *Seeing Studies* collaboration was a chosen method of work, and not a must, there was still freedom in different stages of the production to change the ways in which collaborative work was conducted. Because there was no abiding rule concerning the ways in which decisions were to take place, at certain points in

the design process Natascha and Ashkan did claim authority, and choices were made in a non-consensus manner.

However, to realize the possibility of working with others—and to insist on this possibility to be practically viable still—does hold certain political implications. The question regarding the ways in which authority is to be handled is always a pressing question when people try to operate as a collective. In design, and in the arts in general, the growing demand to professionalize the practice has increased the pressure to deliver individually-branded, readily recognizable products, and has established the role model of the solitary producer as the professional norm. This is ironic. For a musician to record and perform music by himself, using little more than a personal computer, originally suggested mobility and the freedom of owning the means of production. Now that this working model has become the norm, for a group of musicians to record, perform, travel, and live off what they do, has become ever more difficult. Believing that we are free to work alone, we tend to overlook the fact that working by ourselves is becoming the only option the existing social and economical structures are prepared to accommodate. *Seeing Studies* suggests the opposite, making explicit its multiple voices and meanings.

Conversation with Pierre Maite and Sandy Kaltenborn: Bildwechsel / Image-Shift

Perhaps we could start from the beginning. When and how were you first introduced to the idea of *Seeing Studies*? What attracted you to the project?

Pierre Maite: Well, first Natascha approached us after she just got back from Teheran, perhaps a month after her returning to Berlin, and she just briefly showed us the schoolbook and we agreed that yes, sometime we should do something in connection with it.

Sandy Kaltenborn: It was very vague at the beginning what this project was to become, but we have worked with Natascha in the past, and we enjoyed working with her in the sense that every project was a challenge. The projects she brought up have always involved learning, whether about a specific subject she was working on as an artist, or in the way she set up the project. Always challenging, a bit over the edge, but nice projects.

P.M: We collaborated with Natascha on two other books: *The Microscope* and *Solo Show*, so a relationship was already formed.

S.K: And basically we were curious. She was quite between the two worlds (Berlin and Teheran) when we met, as Pierre said, she just came back from Iran a few weeks before meeting us.

P.M: We should also remember that the Green Movement started while she was staying in Teheran. It was the summer after the elections, and she seemed still a bit shocked about it when she came back. Some friends of hers were arrested. We didn't really talk so much about the project the first time we met. She just showed us the book and said that she would have

liked to work on it. On our second meeting she introduced us to Ashkan and explained a bit more about their intentions, but it was still pretty vague. The real work on the project started only when we all met in Teheran.

S.K: Maybe it would be good to emphasize how things were not really set initially. It was not very clear at this point who would take curatorial and editorial roles and how.

But you did have a publication or a book in mind as the final outcome of this process?

P.M: Yes. This was pretty clear from the beginning. We also agreed from the start that the work on the design would be a collaboration between our studio and a designer from Teheran.

S.K: And also Natascha just likes to make books. It's something that she was quite clear about. Producing a book as something that lasts.

But when I joined the project as an intern at the studio, a few initial decisions had already been made regarding the work process and the book's form and format. Can you tell me a little bit about the initial stages of work on *Seeing Studies* and your week in Teheran?

S.K: On our third meeting in Berlin, Natascha asked about our demands in terms of the budget and so on. As we knew we would form a collaboration with another designer, at this point it made sense that we would all go to Teheran together. It was a quick decision, made maybe three or four months before leaving, before we even knew who the designer in Teheran would be. This is very typical of Natascha, trying to include everybody in the process, crowd sourcing the work between people she finds interesting to work with.

P.M: In Teheran we had three or four workshops, meeting with other collaborators and friends of Natascha and Ashkan with whom they've been discussing the book. If I remember correctly,

we met three afternoons for three four hours each and discussed the project, starting to work a little bit on concepts and sketches. It was a very short and intense visit.

S.K: It was short but great. We were very happy to have the opportunity to travel to Iran and meet the people Natascha and Ashkan have been working with in Teheran. The visit was very interesting because it was not only about work, but also about friendship, sharing experiences and identity issues we all had but from different perspectives. For both of us it was the first time in Iran, and I arrived there after a trip to Kabul where my mother is from. There was also a lot of tension in the streets, still very present after the oppression of the Green Movement, which made us cautious about certain things. There were not so many people traveling to Teheran at that time.

P.M: We also went to visit museums, and looked at Iranian calligraphy, which is fascinating from a designer's point of view, and got to know Farhad and his work.

S.K: To describe the workshop situation a bit more, it was first of all very hot. And it was Ramadan, so no smoking and no eating during the day, and the traffic was a disaster. We had most of our workshops at Reza Haeri's apartment, where he had a long dinning table, so Natascha and Ashkan could lay out all of their material on it for us to discuss.

P.M: All of these materials were pretty much new to us. We learned a lot during those meetings. The material was still very raw – mainly the schoolbook and some artwork and images that were later discussed in the conversations presented in the book.

S.K: The whole content concept was not even developed then. Besides our meetings, Natascha and Ashkan were working on the concept of the content, while we were working on the layout concept and combining the two languages, Farsi and English.

So it was clear from the beginning that the book would be in these two languages?

P.M: Yes, that was clear, and also that there would be three parts to the book: a facsimile of the schoolbook, then the artists' contributions, and then the conversations.

S.K: I think Farhad's suggestion for the binding technique came up already on the second time we met for work on the book. He suggested using paper clips instead of a binding, which we thought was a great idea on the one hand, but also made us very anxious.

P.M: We were worried about the consequences of this kind of binding, seeing the direct problems that might come up. It didn't seem very realistic at the time, and also perhaps made a statement that we found too strong. Since it was clear that the book would be produced in Germany, it was also clear that we would take the responsibilities for production.

S.K: When we work on books, a very important consideration in our design is the way the book can be opened. We knew that using the clips as a binding would make opening the book difficult. It is a very nice concept, but we were stressed about its practicality.

The work methodology on the design of the publication was quite complex. The work relations were structured as a collaboration and included partners in different geographical locations, who speak different languages. What kind of challenge did this present?

P.M: The language barrier was one of the main challenges in the collaboration process. In the workshops in Teheran, because Farhad felt more comfortable to speak Farsi, the conversations shifted from Farsi to English, and the other way around. We would have a discussion with Natascha and Ashkan, and then they would continue the conversation in Farsi with Farhad. Sometimes this was a bit difficult, as they would have a half hour

long conversation in Farsi, and then translate it to us in two sentences. But as you know, the problem of translation is very much at the heart of this project.

S.K: I think it was also difficult for Natascha and Ashkan to take all the responsibility of being the ones socially managing us all. This was noticeable mainly when we were in Teheran, but also later on in the work process. Perhaps mainly for Natascha, since she knew Pierre and me well from previous collaborations, and wanted to make Farhad feel welcome and include him in the process as much as possible.

We found out much later that Farhad had certain insecurities about being addressed as a graphic designer in the way that we see our position as graphic designers, or perhaps according to the western stereotypical view of a graphic designer. This was not explicitly discussed to the extent that perhaps it should have been, but from our understanding of graphic design practice, Farhad is more an illustrator-artist-graphic-designer than a classic graphic-communication-designer as we see ourselves.

P.M: Perhaps it is also part of the difference between being used to working as an individual designer and working in a collective studio.

S.K: This also touches on a general question in terms of self-representation and artistic work in graphic design practice. The work on this project was set so that we were not so much on the creative authorship side, but more on the invisible production side, which was a role that we took out of responsibility for making this project happen.

How do you recall the decision-making process while working on the design of the book? How were conflicts resolved and different perspectives negotiated? Who held the authority in this project?

S.K: In many ways *Seeing Studies* was not a typical example of a collaborative project. We work on most of our projects in a collaborative way with our clients, and don't view our work as

providing a service related to the service industry. For us, it is never about who has the authority, but about who has the better argument. This project is extremely complex in regard to this question. I think that in the end Natascha and Ashkan held the authority to make the final decisions, but sometimes were not clear enough about this.

P.M: In a way, they established who can decide what. For example, certain spaces in the book, like the pattern dividers, were left for Farhad's decision, and others were left for us. Perhaps the process was not democratic, but it tried to be inclusive in the sense of giving everybody a space for their perspective and trust them with that.

S.K: Exactly. In this sense it was not really democratic, but the authority was taken in order to try and balance the different voices, and allow them all to have a space in the book. Perhaps a bit like modern government, giving a budget to a certain part of the city to allow them to use it however they choose.

P.M: I think this also happened since it was difficult to have the same level of discussion and engagement with Farhad, because he was not here and because of the language barrier. When things became more urgent and decisions had to be made, I think it was easier to just leave certain parts of the book that seemed fitting open for his contribution. This also helped achieve what Natascha and Ashkan said they were looking for — this weirdness where things don't fit together.

S.K: I think the main thing we should acknowledge here, though, is the fact that we do have a client who is willing to compromise their own authority by working in a collective and open form. I find this to be a very interesting starting point that is not necessarily the norm. Taking the risk of putting some of the general questions regarding the project in the hands of the producers, particularly with such different people in the group, including us.

I find this one of the incredible things about this project. Also, in terms of the institutions willing to facilitate it and pay the costs.

S.K: Yes, well, this was clear from the beginning. This is quite rare to think of someone who has been invited, like Natascha, by document a to do one of their few artist books, and says this is not about the curator or the artist but about the project and what we want to achieve in it. This project was not done for the art market here, perhaps for a very small marginal part of it, but for a different audience.

P.M: I think Natascha used the opportunity given to her to sort out something for herself. This is not only about document a, and the audience, but also about us who were involved in the process, what we learned from it, and the materials we dealt with through it. I think what was important was creating this bridge between Teheran and Berlin, and learning from what it had to offer to all parties included.

What skills did Image-Shift bring to the table? How do you see your role as a graphic designer in the process?

P.M: I think this is a difficult question. I mean, you were here as well, we did talk about the material and the content quite a lot, and about the form things should take.

S.K: Thinking about it now, the project set up was perhaps not as transparent as it could have been, but perhaps that was also impossible. Things were worked out only during the process of doing them, through the conversations, discussions, and relationships formed in the work process. This formed the content as well as the design of the book, which from the start dealt with a complex subject that was a difficult thing to grab.

P.M: I think that somehow we were the first lectors of the book. We were the first to read the materials and react to them. Through these discussions the structure and form of the book took shape. The conversations with Reza Haeri and

Shahab Fotouhi, for example, that came in last, were based partly on several of the conversations we all had in Teheran and later on in Berlin.

It seems to me that perhaps the main challenge in designing *Seeing Studies* was that of materializing the book as a form of incongruous translation in itself—including discord and disturbance in what is still a cohesive and communicative object. In his book *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse describes aesthetics as “the result of the transformation of a given content (an actual historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole”(Marcuse: 8). Do you think this can relate to *Seeing Studies*?

S.K: Looking at the publication now, I am not sure to what extent the three different parts communicate and negotiate with one another. I think that in the end we did not have enough time or space to really have an in-depth discussion about this. Of course, part of the artwork relates to the schoolbook, and the interviews relate to certain aspects of the schoolbook which is maybe reflected in the artwork, but still it is quite difficult for me to say how well they communicate with one another.

P.M: The starting point of this book was the Iranian schoolbook which in itself is a bizarre object, presenting a weird mixture of images from different parts of the world, and very unusual for an art schoolbook. Therefore, this part is not so much explained, as it should remain something that leaves space for you to try and find your own way through it.

Do you think the publication provided an “appropriate” answer to your expectations? How do you feel about the book as an object when you see it now?

P.M: I think it’s still hard for me to say. I feel like the book is still an object that I know too well, but at the same time I can’t really relate to it. I saw it in a bookshop on the shelf, and felt that it was neither ugly nor nice, but it seemed too distant—it was packed

and you could not just open it to flip through and have a look. The book didn't draw much attention in the shop, but looked like an art object. When I talk to people about the book, they always say fixing the clips is difficult and hurts their fingers. Already the first interaction starts badly—you have an object that hurts you when you try to use it ...

S.K: Maybe because of some of my identity issues I feel like I have a more friendly relationship with the book. I can give this book, which is partly written in my mother's language, as a gift, but I also feel, like Pierre, that this is not a nice book. And I remember discussing this when you were around, when Natascha said that this is not about making a nice book. It can be a good thing to make something bizarre if it opens something up, like a kind of productive irritation.

I feel like a big part of the design process was really letting go, which is very unusual. Letting go and letting other people decide. Remember, Pierre, we had a big fight about the fonts, using *Thesis*, which I still don't like. I mean, I still wish that the book would have been nicer, more friendly.

This was an unusual project for us. From the process and the design outcome to the concept and the content, in many ways it is still unclear to me how I relate to this book. We actually sent the book to the competition of the nicest books in Germany, and I asked if we could send in a few words of explanation. Their reply was that they felt, as a jury, that the book did not fit into the competition, and that we should send it to the competition of the best experimental books. I was quite pleased by this. In a sense, it is great to take this nice budget from document a and produce such a strange outcome. A pure luxury.

I still believe that there are certain aspects of the book, mainly in the conversations, which I find very valuable for my own perception. Just to name a stupid example, I was playing with my iPhone the other day and all the little elephants in the game I played jumped from left to right, which made me think about what they do with these apps in Afghanistan or the Arab world, and if the elephants jump in the other direction there.

I have to say that at least here in Israel people become more and more bi-lingual and learn to read from both directions, right and left. We're really used to it, and to seeing things from both perspectives. I think you might find it impressive only because you're not used to it.

S.K: That's really a nice thing to imagine: a world in fifty years where this is more common and people are more aware of having different cultures of reading, and different ways of reception of text. In this sense, *Seeing Studies* did have a personal impact on me, and I am very grateful for having been invited by Natascha to participate in this project.

Graphic design transforms the conceptual into the physical, but, as in any other form of transition from one medium to another, it is open to discords, misunderstandings, and incongruities. You often state that what Image-Shift does is create "visual communication & other misunderstandings." Perhaps you could explain a little bit about what stands behind this statement?

S.K: I think it is important to understand that it is difficult to distinguish between this particular project and certain aspects of work that might not fully relate to this project. We see graphic design as a social media, and we include the process in our understanding of design. For us, the value of design is not in the object, or necessarily visible in the object. It is mainly visible in the process, and when we and our clients talk about it.

By "other misunderstandings" we mean that we don't understand our work in what you could call the classical advertising approach to communication—that there's a clear distinction between the sender and the receiver. It is not about $a+b=c$, but more the fragmented misunderstandings, the productive irritations and problems. This reflects on the recipient, but also on the recipient in relation to the object, and on the object in relation to society, and all this together relates to larger issues in society.

We have a specific understanding of politics and cultural practice or social communications, so of course we have our

stand and our work, and we believe in certain gestures in design. You can see it in politics, but also in design: there is certain kind of design that uses an exclamation mark, but we are very much in love with the question mark. This question mark is sometimes put out by us, because perhaps we know it better because we have been working on this in the past. Sometimes it comes up in the process, when we have a question and we communicate it in terms of dialogue or reaction from the readers. So, it is not so much about our point of view, as Pierre would probably say, not seeing us separated from something, but about forming relationships, and how can you create an open relationship with something, as this is quite difficult.

What stands behind "visual communication & other misunderstandings" also communicates to our clients that we always start from "we don't really know, so let's find out together." Let's work on a process, on a question, and see how far we can get together. The rest is most likely a compromise, out of many reasons: production circumstances, budget, time, stress, etc. It is a matter of direction, and that's why we like clients like Natascha, because she says that document a does not matter. She doesn't want to make a nice book. This is not what this is about. It's about the process. This is something quite rare that we truly respect.

Berlin / Tel-Aviv, March 2012

Bildwechsel / Image-Shift is a collective graphic design studio based in Berlin. The studio is dedicated to cultural, social, and political graphic and communication design.

<http://www.image-shift.net/>







Practicing Praxis

"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd"
—Voltaire

Practicing Praxis in Graphic Design

The following pages are an attempt to try and define and articulate my own understanding and experience of graphic design as a practice. The theories and reference points I will refer to were gathered not so much by rote learning, as through prior readings and encounters, based on self examination.

I will first look into the notion of practice through the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, which enable me to place graphic design in a larger social and political context. I will then look into graphic design as an activity through the notion of praxis and political action, as defined by Aristotle and Hanna Arendt. Through this discussion, using the theories of Bruno Latour, I will try to offer my own understanding of graphic design as a form of praxis, as a tool for bringing together thinking and making.

Practice:

- n. 1. the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it.
 - 2. the customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing of something.
 - 3. repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it.
 - v. 1. perform (an activity) or exercise (a skill) repeatedly or regularly in order to acquire, improve or maintain proficiency in it.
 - 2. carry out or perform (a particular activity, method, or custom) habitually or regularly.
- The Oxford English Dictionary*

The term practice is often understood as a means to an end, as the application of knowledge and skill in order to achieve a certain purpose or goal. Practice is also often positioned in the realm of experience, as opposed to the realm of theory, and is perceived as an activity that relies upon familiarization and

formation of a norm or a habit. Yet, as a force of habit, practice can become mechanical and automatic, an involuntary action that does not enter one's awareness.

Acquiring a practice demands time and discipline. Through training, repetition, reflection and correction we strive to transform what is initially unfamiliar into something that eventually becomes a second nature. It is this familiarization that enables proficiency: once familiar with an activity, one can perform it without having to think about the act itself. In acquiring a practice, the knowledge and skill gained become part of one's process of thinking and identity. Practice both owns and is owned by the individual exercising it.

Practices are classified through prescribed modes of conduct and instructional directions. As such, they are embedded in many dimensions of social, cultural, and political life—the knowledge, habits, and materialized values of professional occupations, arts, and crafts. Graphic design has always occupied a unique position between reading, writing, editing, and distribution (*Graphic Design Now*: 55), and is, in essence, a multidisciplinary practice. An important part of acknowledging the multidisciplinary nature of graphic design is the recognition of the many supposedly non-design activities that are inherent in the design process. Dialogue, research, organization, management, reading, writing, and editing are all features of design practice. Contemporary graphic design touches on nearly every aspect of communication and appears in endless forms in print and on screen. But to completely understand what graphic design is as a practice we must conceive it as more than just the particularity of specific activities. As a practice, graphic design becomes something in itself that is more than the sum of its expressions.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu placed practice in a much wider context of social and political structures. Bourdieu's theory of practice offers an argument for understanding everyday actions, practices, and discourses in the making of symbolic goods. While there are clearly some major differences between graphic design production and that of art and literature (the fields that Bourdieu's research on cultural production focuses on), placing the graphic designer and the practice of graphic design within Bourdieu's scheme is very informative.

In his book *The Outline Logic Of Practice*, Bourdieu suggests that practices are formed as a result of the structuring of what he refers to as "habitus." For Bourdieu, habitus is a system of acquired schemes of perception, thought and action that an individual develops in response to the conditions he or she encounters in the world. Significantly, in Bourdieu's view, what determines the individual's disposition towards these conditions is itself already structured. We arrive into our specific worldly circumstances with our biological, cultural, and socio-economic status already prefigured, and the perceptions we acquire are already indicated in the structure of the world we see, come to know, and act within (our family, language, culture, environment and so on). The conditions we encounter produce the structures of the habitus, which, in their turn, form the basis for the appreciation of all subsequent experiences. Thus, the habitus is at once structured and structuring. It is, as Bourdieu writes, "a product of history," which "produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history" (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). It is a present past that continues into the future through the production and reproduction of structures and practices. The habitus is at once the means by which practices are generated, and the means by which practices are regulated. When we participate in the world, we always follow the guidelines of the habitus, thereby recreating and reinforcing the habitus. Thus, a system of circular relations emerges: the conditions we encounter in the world produce within us structured dispositions, that produce structured actions that, in turn, reproduce the very conditions we encounter in the world. In this way the habitus excludes interests and modes of behavior that are not compatible with existing practices, and ensures that all action is performed in an organized and habitual fashion.

Another central aspect of habitus, according to Bourdieu, is its embodiment. Habitus is deeply internalized within our bodies and minds, often operating below the level of consciousness. It is, in Bourdieu's words, an "embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history" (56). Bourdieu suggests that individuals do not operate in the world through conscious calculation, but rather according to

principles that exist, for the most part, beyond their grasp. Our behaviors and dispositions are socially reinforced from an early age through education and culture, and are passed on from generation to generation. Thus, through repeated exposure to cultural works, we internalize the rules that govern the production of these works, even without our being aware of the existence of such rules, and these rules, in turn, determine our perceptions and dispositions.

If we were to think of design in Bourdieu's terms, both the designed object and the act of design are means by which we, individually and collectively, gain our particular habitus and act within it. For Bourdieu, cultural production, consumption and reproduction are processes that cannot be separated. Although he never addressed graphic design specifically in his research and theory, Bourdieu's studies on the socio-political role of the cultural producer hold particular relevance to understanding graphic design practice.

Bourdieu perceives culture as arbitrary and constructed. In his view, the ability to produce and understand art is a learned or socially constructed ability, rather than an innate or natural ability. He also suggests that art appreciation and production are part of the same mutually reinforcing mechanism that contributes to the maintenance of hierarchies in society. Bourdieu claims (*The intellectual Field and Creative Project*) that artists and intellectuals act within semi-autonomous social spaces, which he terms "cultural fields," where practice is guided by commonly held beliefs and values. Bourdieu goes on to suggest that an artist's work is the product of a dialectic between the artist's own intention for the work and the "social pressures which directed the work from outside" (Bourdieu, 1969 :96), that is, the artist's perception of the aesthetic preferences of the audience. He also suggests that, in practice, the resolution of this dialectic ranges from work being produced to satisfy perceived expectations at one extreme, and on the other extreme avant-garde work being produced with the aim of creating new audiences. Yet, Bourdieu points out that artists always work within the historically derived contemporary logic of their own field, and that art is always conceived and received in relation to the projects of other artists, both past and present (104).

He also suggests that the aim of all artists is to produce work that by means of its recognized value will increase their cultural capital and thereby improve their position within their own field of action. By cultural capital Bourdieu refers to the educational and skill-set advantages that impart higher status and material gain on certain individuals (Webster: 38).

At its core, graphic design seems to operate at a state of schizophrenia, dealing with inescapable contradictions (van Toorn: 320). The graphic designer constantly works under the dialectic described by Bourdieu: between his own intuitions and interests, and those of his audience; between seeking autonomy in an attempt to renew the vocabulary, and arriving at a universal soberness of expression within the existing symbolic and institutional order; and between acting in the service of a public interest, and engaging at the same time in the private interests of the commissioner.

Bourdieu places great importance on the idea of cultural production being as autonomous as possible from what he names the "field of power" — the synthesis of the economic and political fields. He sees this autonomy as central to his account of the development of culture-making, as it provides the conditions for change and resistance to what Bourdieu defines as "symbolic violence" — the various unnoticed, partly unconscious, modes of social and cultural subjections exerted by the dominant system of hierarchization. Bourdieu suggests reflexivity as a means to gaining this autonomy from the field of power. Through our awareness of our own dispositions, perceptions, and actions, we can better understand our own habits, and become aware of the different strategies and forces working within the field of power. This awareness cannot be completely separated from the habitus, as we always act from within the boundaries of the habitus, but it offers a method for defining these boundaries. For Bourdieu, reflexivity is an inquiry into the limitations that constitute knowledge itself. In his words, "nothing can be thought unless through instruments of thought which are socially constituted" (Bourdieu, 1992: 40). Reflexivity relies upon our awareness of the provisions and guidelines of the habitus and the manners by which structures and practices are produced within it. This awareness enables us to objectify

the structures of thought and action that we have internalized, to study them, and to use what we discover to understand our own habitual behaviors and practices. Reflexivity opens a possibility for autonomy and change, because it provides us with some measure of control over these internalized structures. It provides us with an understanding of the specific position we occupy within the field of power, and, in doing so, enables us to negotiate and shape, within the confines of the habitus and in accordance with its structures, our own perceptions and actions. Reflexivity allows us to position ourselves strategically in relation to cultural, political, social, and economic fields of activity, and to conform to, or divert from, that which we encounter. Thus, the habitus is not static, although durable, and change is made possible by habituated actions that develop gradually through communities of practice.

Many times when designers try and recognize their own condition and assess the purpose of their own activity there is a tendency to question the value of design's outcome: to point out the advantages or disadvantages of the products of design work, and justify the practice according to what is designed and how it serves to fulfill a need or solve a problem. This type of reflection on the value and purpose of design practice is presented in many of the publications, books, websites, and conferences discussing socially relevant design. Through statements about the primacy of human and environmental needs, designers argue what should be done and in what way. To be a socially and politically engaged designer is then characterized as righteously attending to a worthwhile cause. This manifestation of political action serves as mankind's way to organize and "fix" itself. It presents politics as a collective form of solving problems that concern us all. The rhetoric needed for this kind of action is that of consensus, viewing the inevitable clash of opinions as just an intrinsic obstacle to achieve the very best way to face difficulties. Any confrontation becomes part of the problem, and the only reason for a public form of action is to offer participation in the solution.

By striving to neutralize conflicts in a society disturbed by contradictions, graphic design, viewed as a service provider, becomes a mediating concept aimed at consensus. This consensus almost always comes down to reconciliation with

the present state of social relations, to accepting the point of view of the established order as the context for design's action. By continually smoothing over the conflicts in the production relationships, design develops a practical and conceptual coherence which can afford its representational and institutional power as a problem-solver. In this manner, design produces cultural expressions that define what is normal and what is desirable, and can legitimize itself in the eyes of the established social order, which in turn is confirmed and legitimized by the contributions which design makes to symbolic production. Here we face a paradox, as design means to deal with paradoxes and contradiction, but instead finds itself proposing 'solutions' to what the 'field of power' defines as the 'problems'. Instead of gaining autonomy through reflexivity, design, as a problem-solving mechanism, becomes more dependent on the dominant system of hierarchization.

This limiting understanding of design as an 'instrumentalist' activity relates to what Hanna Arendt characterized as the "substitution of making for acting" (Arendt: 229). Before I expand on Arendt's theory, I would first like to take a closer look at the two modes she is referring to: making and acting. By introducing these two modes, Arendt revives the Aristotelian distinction between *poieses* and *praxis*.

Praxis:

A term in use since Aristotle, to whom *praxis* is one of the three basic activities of human beings (the others being *theoria* or theory, and *poiesis*, or skillful manufacture). *Praxis* in Aristotle includes voluntary or goal-directed action, although it sometimes also includes the condition that the action is itself part of the end, an action done for its own sake. In Kant, *praxis* is the application of a theory to cases encountered in experience, but is also ethically significant thought, or practical reason, that is, reasoning about what there should be as opposed to what there is. Kant's placing of the practical above the theoretical influenced the subsequent thought of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. But it is in Marx that the concept becomes central to the new philosophical ideal of transforming

the world through revolutionary activity. The subordination of theory to practice is connected with the inability of reason to solve contradictions, which are instead removed by the dialectical progress of history. Praxis is also connected with genuinely free, self-conscious authentic activity as opposed to the alienated labour demanded under capitalism.

—*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*

In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle expands upon a theory of action which argues for the virtue and excellence possible in activity within a sphere of interacting free and equal citizens. This kind of action (praxis) is regarded by him as a perfected form of production (poises), in which the aim is operating from within, and is identical to the process of its production. Praxis is compared by Aristotle to sight and seeing, or to flute playing, activities in which action and aim are one and the same, at once an end and an activity (Gold: 108).

Essentially, Aristotelian praxis refers to a kind of life, a way of being, which a free citizen engages in and aims for. The end to any praxis is the embodiment in one's character so that the actions preformed are of "doing well" or "being well" (*Ethics*: 1095a16–23). Aristotle points out that "a course of life (bios) is action (praxis), not production (poiesis)" (*Politics*: I.4.1254a7), meaning that a life-project as such is not an instrumental process aiming at some outcome beyond itself, but ultimately consists of self-enactment that lasts only as long as life lasts (Backman: 31). Aristotle's praxis is entirely determined by the present, and is superior to poises in that it is not future-oriented, but already contains its full meaning at every moment (40).

The Aristotelian agent does not need to theoretically search or know the essence of his humanity in order to be good, but rather must understand that judging well and acting virtuously within his surroundings are the conditions within which the highest and most complete humanity can be expressed. It is knowing how to act and how to judge well within a given context that is required. Yet this 'knowing how' is not exact science. Praxis as 'well doing' does not have an absolute explanative principle. Since actions are conducted within a

certain context and framework, the possibility of error always exists (Gold: 111). A plurality of agents and the particularity of deeds are necessary conditions for Aristotelian praxis, as chance and uncertainty lay at the ground of human actions: at any stage, events, persons or even the calculated process itself, might turn and change the outcome. Praxis for Aristotle can not be achieved through divine reliability in regards to human activity. Without a place for evaluation, reconsideration, and detours, praxis will be excluded from the ethical-political life. Excellence in deliberation and choice can be carried out only according to one's excellence of ethical judgment, which is consolidated from one's ethical character through consideration, decision-making, and actions (112). Aristotle's ethical-political agent is constantly bound by reflexive acts of deliberation, choice, and judgment of means, which are to be acted out, and whose results are themselves the means to other actions and ends (121). As such, praxis is a form of becoming, or a motion. It is "the actuality of the fulfillment of what exists potentially insofar as it exists potentially" (*Ethics*: Bk. X, Ch. viii, 1178a32). This reasoning and knowledge is rather dynamic, as it aims at its own spontaneous movement. It is its own "final cause".

Arendt refers to this view of praxis as a form of "living deed" (Arendt: 204). As such, praxis can be viewed as an actuality, or as both being-at-work and being-at-an-end (*ênérgeia* and *éntelecheia*). In the structure of praxis as an action lies the possibility for achieving the highest aspect and expression of man, as Arendt asserts: "Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement" (206). In Arendt's view of Aristotle, sheer actuality lies in the work of man as captured in praxis as political action. In order to fulfill Aristotle's notion of human happiness and prosperity as the end of praxis, the ideal good must find its ground in the deeds and discourse of men, in a life with others. As such, praxis always remains within the human arena. Arendt views human action as the self-disclosure of the individual. The quality of a person's acts are what distinguishes their life-span and specific life story from

the mere fact of being alive. Through our own deeds, our relative individuality is constituted, and who we are for other people is determined.

According to Arendt, this characteristic of praxis enacted in political action, offers faith and hope in human affairs. Politics offer a realm in which human beings are confronted with, and balanced by, human otherness and the unknown future. It is through political action that humans are able to start something truly new and share it with others. As new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, they each hold a capability for new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chain of events set in motion by previous actions. Arendt speaks of action as "the one miracle-working faculty of man," (246), pointing out that in human affairs it is actually quite reasonable to expect the unexpected.

But Arendt's analysis of action holds not only a message of hope, it also carries warnings. The other side of this unpredictability of action is a lack of control over its effects. Since action always "acts into a medium where every process is the cause of new processes" (190), it creates a "web of relationships" and sets things in motion where one cannot foresee even the effects of one's own initiatives, let alone control what happens when they are entangled with other people's initiatives in the public arena. Action can become therefore deeply frustrating, for its results can turn out to be quite different from what we intended.

Arendt points out that because of this lack of order and the irregular nature of action amongst plural agents, there is a tendency to try and "substitute making for action", to dismiss the true nature of political action by thinking of politics in terms of production, as a means of attaining a higher end. This means-to-an-end way of thinking and addressing issues with a problem-solving mechanism calls for a dogmatic logic in favor of a cause. A logic that states exclusively what problem is to be solved assumes a general principle, an ideology. But, for Arendt, since "Men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (7), to conceive of politics as production is to ignore human plurality and capability of new perspectives and actions. As a person of her time, for Arendt the inevitable outcome of

this view on politics as ideology is the ideological totalitarianism of the 20th century. This type of utopian ideology is no longer content with simply dismissing the plurality of opinions and the unpredictability involved in political action, but seeks to destroy any scope for initiative, any room for plurality. It sets to make politics into the smooth, secure, and efficient administrative process of implementing a social ideal (Backman: 44).

Arendt describes the search for truth as a dialogic process in which a person must always be ready to test his conclusions against a changing reality. In her view, ideology interrupts this process, as it takes a single proposition and applies it to all aspects of reality. It is, as Arendt writes in *Ideology and Terror*, the "logic of an idea"(qtd. in Aschheim: 121); but a logic which is never tested against empirical reality. On the contrary, this logic re-envisions reality in accordance with its own internal requirements. In order to bring change, something different and unfamiliar has to be introduced.

What designers do almost every time they address the "designer's responsibility" discussion is to adopt an ideological point of view (Kaizer). This offers an answer and a justification to the legitimacy of design activity. Once designers agree about the cause, they can go on to think about how to respond to it. Design then binds itself to the greater cause every time it seeks its own validation. This reduces design practice into being a means to an end, in which the underlying questions are "what to design?" and "how to design?", questions to which all possible answers are already found in the greater cause.

This is not to underestimate the great value of design as an effective tool for solving problems and meeting needs wherever they exist, if we could only truly agree without any controversy about what the problem to be solved is. The trouble with the notion of problem-solving is its contingency. The problem in question could be anything: global warming, social housing, over-consumption, and even "the Jewish problem." Indeed, some of the largest crimes of the 20th century were promoted, in part, by the work of designers who (often unintentionally) created the blueprints for mass killing (Colin and Parrinder: 17). As designers, our social responsibility should be to ask questions, rather than to place emphasis on problem-solving.

Following Arendt's theory of action, what determines the nature of design as a political activity does not derive only from the way in which assignments are selected, or from the political orientation of the commissioner. These attributes do not automatically affect the true political potential of the designed object, because the nature of the dialogue it forms is as important as its origins and what it expresses.

Designers often refer to concluded projects as "being alive" as a way to say they are a success, and are no longer under their control. This indicates that beyond any attempt to respond to an outside purpose or to achieve a predetermined goal, the project has reached an autonomous condition, it is capable of provoking other reactions that would have remained unthinkable and unknowable until its appearance. Design practice requires a movement from the known to the unknown, from what exists to what does not yet exist, from the actual to the possible, and then back to the actual (Boekraad: 40). It takes part in an ongoing reciprocal relationship with other works of design, informing, and being continually informed by them. Thus, design practice operates in a dialectical model of progress in which the future is shaped by an active dialogue with the ghosts of the past, and the past itself becomes an active agent of change, as a specter of the future.

In this sense, graphic design can become a perfect example of praxis: a synthesis of theory and practice, in which each informs the other simultaneously. When approaching a problem in design, an ideology is not necessarily a prerequisite, something that has to be owned or studied in order to design. Rather, ideology is something that can be generated during the actual act of designing by means of negotiation with the problems at hand. It is then, when the artificial borders between manual labor and intellectual labor are eliminated, that thinking becomes a form of making, and making becomes a form of thinking.

But if we truly want to understand the social and political dimension of graphic design practice, perhaps we should ask if design could be seen as an end to itself, which leads us to other questions: "why design this?" and then "why design anything at all?" Unlike "what to design?" or "how to design?" the question "why design?" targets the major definition of the activity's purpose.

Sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour provides a possible answer to this question by taking a close look into what the act of design is, and what purpose it can serve. In his 2008 keynote lecture given for the Design History Conference "Networks of Design," Latour stated that "matters of fact have now clearly become matters of concern". By this he refers to the ways in which things that have presented themselves as matters of fact are now visible as a style, "as historically situated aesthetics, a way to light objects, to frame them, to present them, to situate the gaze of the viewers, to design the interiors in which they are presented, and the politics with which they are associated with". As we become more aware and open to the idea that objects and messages are mediated and negotiated, we become more aware of their artifactuality and realize that they can also be modified. Hence, there is more choice, because everything that is made by humans can be changed by humans.

Latour finds in design a possibility for what he calls a "post Promethean theory of action", in which design as a concept replaces previous actions such as constructing, building, and materializing. He suggests that, as a concept, design implies a sense of humility and modesty, as it does not have an underlying basis or principle, and, at its backbone, lies attentiveness to details, skillfulness, and craftsmanship. Design lends itself to interpretation and carries with it a new attention to meaning. When we think of something as being designed, we bring all of the tools, skills, and craft of interpretation to the analysis of that thing. As Latour states, "artifacts are becoming conceivable as complex assemblies of contradictory issues." When things are viewed as having been well or badly designed, they no longer appear as matters of fact. Furthermore, as their appearance as matters of fact weakens, their place among the many matters of concern that are at issue is strengthened. Design is never an action or a process that begins from scratch, because to design is always to redesign. Much like Bourdieu's habitus, there is always something that exists prior to the design, as a given, an issue, a problem. This can be viewed as a weakness, but, as Latour argues, also suggests an advantage. For Latour, design is never to create out of nothing, and, in that sense, design is an

antidote to founding, colonizing, establishing, or breaking with the past. It is an antidote to hubris and to the search for absolute certainty and radical departures.

When we say that something has been designed, we are forced to ask whether it has been well or badly designed. The expansion of design into the definitions of things carries with it not only meanings and interpretations, but also a sense of morality. Designers can no longer hide behind the projection of things as matters of fact. As Latour states, "no designer will be able to claim: 'I am just stating what exists', or, 'I am simply reading the bottom line'." This inartistic dimension of design offers a way to understand design as a political action. For, if every indisputable matter of fact can no longer be stabilized as such, and becomes a disputed matter of concern, and every object becomes a project, then we are entering a new political territory. A territory where design becomes a perpetual set of negotiations, that is a collaborative effort—even when the collaborators are not all visible, welcomed, or willing. As Latour writes in his book *Reassembling the Social* (2005), we cannot assume that the fundamental question of "who counts" has to be answered. The social is "a precarious gathering of associations, continually in need of reassessment and reconstitution" (qtd. in Deamer: 162). Those who count, Latour argues, are all the actors, all the entities, animate and inanimate, under investigation.

Following Latour's line of thought, perhaps it is worth returning to the idea of reflexivity. For a practice to become reflexive, it must turn into a collective endeavor, spanning the entire field and its participants, aimed at exposing the socially conditioned, subconscious structures that underlie the formulation of theories and perceptions of the social world (Grenfell: 187). Maintaining such an awareness and continual reflexivity can enable us, as designers, to better decipher and understand our own position and place, and to become adequate in the categories and conditions that structure our own discourse and practice. This reflexivity holds importance in the practice of graphic design. As Bourdieu asserts, "one of the ways of mastering communication is to make conscious, for those who

speak and for those who receive, the categories of emission and reception" (Bourdieu, 1992: 38). Combining inclusive and self-reflective activities into the act of design itself allows for further understanding of design as a practice, and contributes to the historical discourse regarding its purposes and functions.

The complex nature of design can be useful in developing reflexive thought and understanding. By looking for incongruence and deviations from the expected, other viewpoints often appear. We can also become more conscious of reductions and simplifications, keeping the complexity of the matter of concern alive. Personal intuition, as well as cultural traditions, can play an important part in this, but only in dialogue with what Robin Kinross calls "the awkward questions put by reason" (Kinross, 2003: 73). By this Kinross calls for a reason that is active and connected to feelings and to the world, a reason that is critical.

Practicing graphic design as a form of praxis demands time. In order to understand one's own practice and work process one must have the time and space to look back and reflect upon one's own decision-making and choices. As graphic designers, most of us do not have the power, or the economic independence, to challenge head-on the priorities of those who pay for our skills. In daily design practice, immediacy is primary, and efficiency is equated with speed. We tend to scan for quick responses and look for quick solutions. But it is because our practice owns us, as much as we own our practice, and because in our current economy our long working hours blur the difference between work and other cultural activities, that we must create space within our daily practice for thinking and trying to understand and decipher meanings.

This is not to say that every graphic designer should think of design practice as a form of political action, but that it might make their daily practice much richer if they regard design as a form of thinking. The politicization of design in this sense amounts to a way of localizing design as an activity within a wider social spectrum, a mode of thinking which serves as a basis for acting based on the idea that effective action is impossible without attempting understanding. The only way to deal with the urgency and complexity of current "matters of

concern” is by dealing with them — by engaging, acting, working, producing, and so on — while crucially never losing sight of the broader systems within which these actions are taking place. Only by practice as a form of praxis can designers fulfill their role, that of trying to communicate, or reveal, a meaning for what surrounds them. Trying to make sense.

"In any case, the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear — indeed so unclear that it would be ridiculous to pretend to define them from the uncontaminated podium of rhetoric. It would only be another way of escaping reality and leaving it exactly as it is."

—Umberto Eco

Final Thoughts

Graphic design has a lot to do with our ability to articulate ourselves, to be able to talk about design and to explain it precisely. But it also has a lot to do with intuition and observation. Observing the state of things around us, things that raise questions and concerns and create a sense of wonder and amazement, discord and confusion. Things that at many times remain unclear, and that, in our attempt to define them, demand a constant negotiation between potential narratives and points of view, often speaking in multiple, equal voices.

This sense of complexity causes frustration and often makes us look for easy and fast solutions. As Norman Potter warns us in his seminal book *What Is a Designer: Things, Places, Messages* (1969), our need to become useful and search for order when faced with chaos, causes us to become "rashly seduced by unitary views of disparate phenomena," making things seem hopeful and manageable, wishing for the "best of east and west without the penalties of either" (Potter: 94). This, perhaps, is one of the main reasons why *Seeing Studies* presents a rare opportunity worth reflecting upon, as discord and incongruity are part of its objective.

The work process on the book emphasized many of the concerns and thoughts I hold regarding my own practice as a graphic designer. The project relates to many questions concerning the very meanings of design. Concerning the ways in which we "see" and "know" the world around us, and the modes of communication we use as we translate our specific experiences and understandings into descriptive realizations, taking notice of the things we choose to give voice to, thus making them "visible," and the things we keep silent about, thereby making them "invisible."

Taking part in *Seeing Studies*, I was offered the opportunity to join in on a collaborative learning and unlearning experience. The discussions and debates that took place during the work process touched upon urgent questions of language, identity, politics, education, relationships, authority, work, art, and

design. The work process offered me new perspectives, and validated some of the previous notions I held, regarding graphic design as a practice, matters which I have discussed in the theoretical part of this thesis. But, perhaps, what truly became clearer during the work on *Seeing Studies*, and in writing this thesis as well, was the difficulty we face when attempting to reach full understanding.

Realizing the existence of something we never knew was there before sparks our curiosity. Finding the Iranian schoolbook in Teheran, Natascha and Ashkan described the encounter as one of sheer wonder, asking naive questions in an attempt to understand: "what is this?" "how does it work?" "why is it here?" These questions led to the translation of the book. But in the attempt to accumulate information, while some answers were provided, additional questions surfaced regarding language and meaning. These new questions further asserted Natascha and Ashkan's sense of wonder and curiosity, and led them to initiate the project of *Seeing Studies*.

As we learn more and accumulate more knowledge, effective discussion and debate is possible, but much still remains a speculation. It is then, through close examination, that questions, answers, contradictions, negotiations, incongruities, discord, and dissonance emerge. This stage in the process of attempting to understand can become the most rewarding and engaging one. It relates to what Image-Shift describe as "being in love with the question mark." As something frustrates our attempts to understand it, it can become a liberating force that encourages an active reconsideration of existing understandings. Learning how to appreciate things we do not understand—and how to value the state of curiosity in which it places us—can have a political implication as well, strengthening our ability to co-exist with differences and remain open to the adjustments that these differences demand from us.

Complete understanding kills curiosity and produces a dead-end in which speculation gives way to consensus, choices are enforced, and the many questions are resolved in common answers in which things are defined, fixed, and captured. But, the ongoing process of attempting to understand, though never really understanding completely, can become absolutely

productive. The relentless attempt to understand, by thinking and making, is what moves a practice forward and fills our work with valid meaning.

Our attempt to understand and make sense through practice develops over many projects, spanning many years. Although never reaching full understanding, the projects we choose and the things we find interesting to articulate lay a map of our actions and inclinations. The way these projects are phrased, disassembled, reorganized, and rendered, reveals a philosophy, an aesthetic and political position, an argument and a critique. Our work then becomes more than a practice. It becomes our life deed.

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